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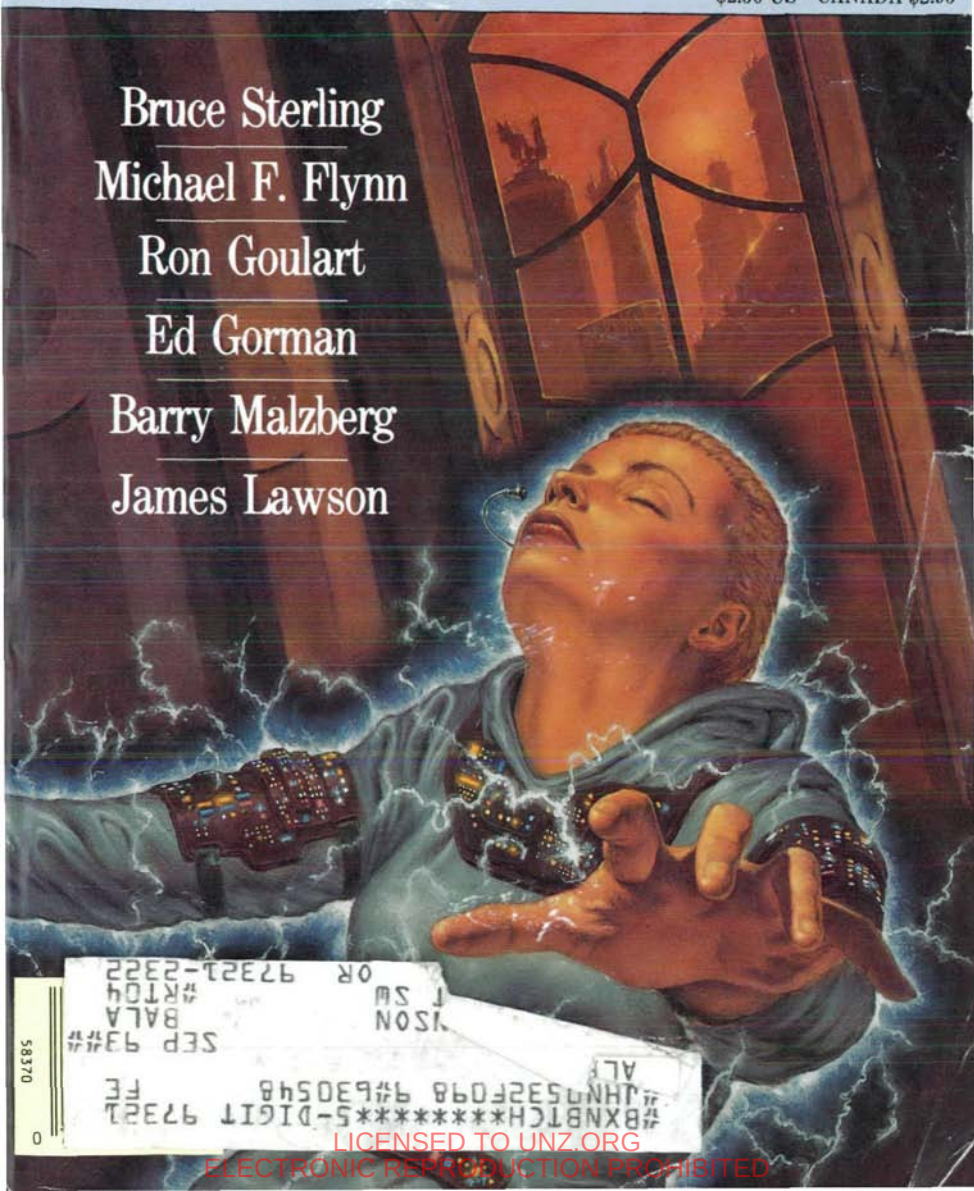

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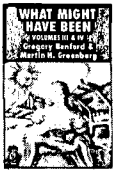

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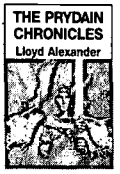

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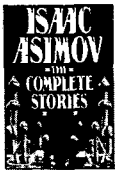

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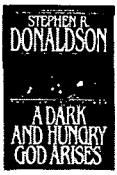

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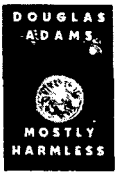

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APRIL • 44th Year of Publication

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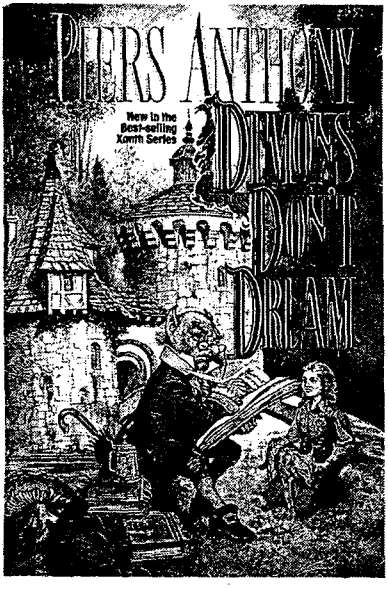

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

SHARYN MCCRUMB calls herself the Salman Rushdie of science fiction. Her novel, *Bimbos of the Death Sun*, made her one of the most hated — and the most admired — writers in science fiction. It didn't much matter that the novel is a mystery, nor that it won the Edgar Award given by the Mystery Writers of America. *Bimbos of the Death Sun* lampoons the world of science fiction fans with an over-the-top look at murder at a science fiction convention. Many fans considered the portrait rude and nasty — and it is — but it is also one of the funniest pieces of fiction to hit the stands since Elizabeth Peters tackled the romance world in the 1980s.

McCrumb has written other, serious, mystery novels which have received wide acclaim. It took four years, but she finally returned to the world of science fiction with her second Jay Omega mystery, *Zombies of the Gene Pool*. And the entire debate over the appropriateness of her topic has started again.

Zombies of the Gene Pool deals with the reunion of the Lanthanides, a group of New York science fiction fans from the 1950s. Many of the Lanthanides became well-known sf writers. The occasion: the unveiling of a time capsule buried thirty years before.

Death, mayhem, and a lot of funny bits follow. The novel begins with an amusing — and believable — dialog between professor and student over whether Joseph Conrad plagiarized Robert Silverberg, and goes from there.

I found both novels to be a delight. But then, I like slapstick humor with a vicious bite. I like esoteric humor that depends on the knowledge of a specific topic, and I like humor that exaggerates noticeable characteristics (good and bad), as much political humor does.

McCrumb manages to do all of those things in her Jay Omega mysteries.

I have defended my enjoyment of those books to countless friends and sf fans. It took too many of those discussions before I realized I was defending my sense of humor.

I came of age during Watergate. I love to see someone go after sacred

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cows, no matter whose cows they are. (Even if they're mine.) But a lot of people find such humor offensive and threatening. No amount of debate can change their opinion, because humor is very personal. If it doesn't work for some readers, then those readers do not see the value of the story, while the readers who enjoyed the story will defend it to the death.

All of this makes humor difficult to write, and as difficult to edit. The best a humor writer can hope for is to please half of the audience most of the time. The best an editor can hope for is that what strikes her as funny will also appeal to part of the readership — and that Amusing Story #1 will appeal to a different segment of the readership than Amusing Story #2.

The best humorous short fiction comes from a combination of a strong plot and strong characterization. The humor must emerge from the situation, and be in control (even if the writer is doing slapstick). That way, the humor is focussed, directed and pointed. The things that everyone mentions about the McCrumb books, detractor and backer alike, is that her barbs at the sf field are unrelenting and strong.

Humor like that has become all too rare in our genre. Sacred cows from the space program to science fiction itself have become too sacred. If we can't laugh at ourselves, then we can't see ourselves clearly.

It's a shame that McCrumb considers herself the Salman Rushdie of sf. All she has done is try to save us from our own seriousness.

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Ron Goulart has written countless short stories, novels, comic books and screenplays. He last appeared in F&SF with a story called "Hershey's Kisses" in our January, 1992 issue. No one could ever accuse Ron of taking himself — or the genre — too seriously. In the following story, he explores what a true fear of success can do.

Fear of Success

By Ron Goulart

RIGHT AFTER THE announcement that he'd won the Nobel Prize, he slipped into his oldest clothes and sneaked onto a rattletrap bus headed for Pittsburgh. Ned Browner was hoping he could lose himself in one of the run-down sections of the city, but the bus overturned before it even got out of Connecticut. Browner saved the life of the young woman who'd been sitting next to him, dragging her unconscious body free just before the bus caught fire and exploded. Turned out she was a missing cosmetics heiress suffering from temporary amnesia and the crash jogged her memory back into place. The grateful family rushed Browner a check for $1 million. He signed that over to charity, rejected the heiress's invitation to move in with her and headed dejectedly back to his twenty-six-room mansion in Southport. It was then that he decided on suicide as the only way to stop his terrible run of good fortune.

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* * *

A little over a year earlier, shortly after his forty-third birthday, Browner had been just another discontented advertising copywriter living in a rapidly depreciating colonial in Brimstone, Connecticut. Middle-sized and on the lean side, approaching total baldness, he was earning barely $75,000 a year. His second wife, whom everyone except him called Juney, was eleven years younger and, in addition to working part-time in a real estate office, had recently decided to become active in community service. They had no children or pets.

Browner, who'd been with the same Manhattan agency for the past seven years, specialized in food accounts and, up until the time his luck changed, the only recognition his work had garnered was a Special Mention certificate from the Gotham Ad Club for his series of 1988 print ads for the FatZo Imitation Lard account.

On the morning that he learned about the McNider Foundation and its interest in him, Browner was suffering from a vague sort of flu. Following considerable debate with himself, he'd decided to stay home from the ad agency and go visit his doctor in nearby Westport.

His wife had left their three-bedroom home before him, since this was her day to do volunteer work in the Brimstone Soup Kitchen for the Homeless. Browner wasn't clear why, since there were only three homeless people in town, it took June six hours to handle her share of the chores.

He arrived at the office of Wilson Muldoon, M.D., at exactly 10:45 on a chill gray Tuesday. He sat in the small waiting room, which he shared with a plump white-haired woman who was holding a bloody towel to her forehead, and glanced through the magazines. Muldoon didn't subscribe to *Time* or *The New Yorker*, or if he did, he didn't believe in sharing them with his patients. Instead you had to fill the time with year-old and older back issues of such periodicals as *Luxury Vacations, Expensive Hobbies, Private Jet Weekly* and *Big Money Investor.*

At 11:13 a nurse escorted Browner into the doctor's spacious black and white office.

"Ned," inquired Dr. Muldoon from behind his wide teak desk, "how are you feeling?"

Browner sat and faced the large blond doctor. "I'm feeling that somewhere along the way I made a wrong turning," he replied. "That the things

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I dreamed of accomplishing when I was in my twenties, those exciting and stimulating goals, have all eluded me. I feel that I'm no more than a second-rate copywriter, grinding out inane thirty-second radio spots for such vile products as Hugo Rumhauser's Gourmet Microwave Popcorn when I ought to be a novelist, a playwright and a man of letters. Besides which, for the last twenty-four hours I've had the drizzly shits."

The physician nodded sympathetically. "You're the third case of this so far today," he told him. "Diarrhea and depression."

"It's more than depression, Wilson. I suspect that I'm finally seeing my life as it really is."

"C'mon, Ned, you have a completely satisfying life."

"Then how come I'm not satisfied?"

Reaching into a deep desk drawer, Dr. Muldoon brought out several packets of sample capsules. "Take — let's just see what it says here — take one of these things every four hours. You're not allergic to durwood-percussion, are you?"

"To what?"

"No, you're probably not." He pushed the packets across the desk toward him. "Plenty of rest and liquids, too. How's Juney? What a little dynamo. You haven't been falling down?"

"Not so far. Should I be?"

"It's uncommon with this type of flu. But if you have Heresheimer-Nordoff syndrome, which has similar symptoms — Best stick out your tongue."

Browner obliged.

Muldoon shook his head. "Looks just fine to me."

"I did notice earlier that it's got greenish fuzz all over it."

"Nothing to be concerned about."

"Is this other thing more serious?"

"It would be, yes, but you don't seem to have it." Dr. Muldoon rose up. "If you happen, however, to fall down, give my nurse a call. We can run a Catamarang-Shooter Test."

"When I fall down, if I do, will I be able to get up again?"

"Usually, yes. But quit brooding, you probably don't have Heresheimer-Nordoff at all."

Stuffing the sample packets of capsules into the pockets of his windbreaker, Browner asked, "Are you satisfied with your life?"

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"I haven't thought about it, much too busy." The doctor escorted him over to the door and opened it. "You ought to get involved in community service, take your mind off your troubles. Follow your wife's example." He eyed Browner as he passed into the hallway. "When's the last time we ran a Runecast-Linebacker Test on you, Ned?"

"Never."

"When you're feeling better, maybe you ought to come in for one," suggested the physician, frowning thoughtfully. "People of your age have to start being more careful."

"Is forty-three a dangerous age?"

"Oh, I had the notion you were fifty," he said, smiling. "You've got a few years then. Give my best to Juney. Pay the nurse $95 on your way out."

It was outside on the misty parking lot that Browner heard he'd been singled out by the McNider Foundation.

The blonde woman was slim, in her early thirties, dressed in a very simple and expensive black suit. Her hair was cropped short and she held an old-fashioned spiral notebook in her left hand. She was perched, legs crossed, on the hood of his eight-year-old Japanese sports car. "Browner?" she asked, sounding as though she'd be disappointed if he responded in the affirmative.

"I am, yeah. You're going to dent that if you stay sitting on —"

"Typical," she commented, uncrossing her legs and sliding off his car. "You're really Edward McDermott Browner, Jr.?"

"There *is* a dent." He rubbed his fingertips along the hood.

"I asked if you were Ned Browner?"

"Sure, but what did you mean by 'typical'?"

"You gave a typical flop-oriented response, Browner," she replied, turning to a fresh page in her notebook. "A more positive person wouldn't worry about his run-down old clunk of a car. He'd concentrate instead on finding out why an obviously upper-class and well-to-do woman was asking him who he was. He'd anticipate financial gain, possibly even romance."

"You're selling something, huh? Well, right now we have all the stocks and municipal —"

"Climb in your car, Browner. Drive me over to Fagin's Diner on the Post Road."

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"I'm not especially fond of Fagin's."

"It's a nice place to talk."

He frowned at her. "Why would we want to talk?"

"We're changing your life."

"We? Meaning you and me?"

She laughed very briefly. "That'd be some team," she remarked. "No, Browner, I'm referring to the McNider Foundation."

"I've never heard of the McNider Foundation."

Walking around the car, she opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat. "Fortunately they've heard of you."

Slowly, he unlocked his door and slid in behind the wheel. "I had the car locked. How'd you open the door?"

"Sorcery," she replied.

FAGIN'S DINER was small and narrow. Fagin himself was on hands and knees in the aisle between the rickety booths when they arrived.

"Why prolong it?" he was saying into a shadowy area beneath one of the rickety tables. "Come on out and face death like a man."

Edging around him, Browner inquired, "Who's under there?"

"Looks like a rat to me," answered the proprietor. "Although you usually don't see rats this big in this part of Connecticut. You're too early, by the way, for any of the Luncheon Specials and way too late for breakfast."

"We'll just have the vile coffee."

"Franny," yelled Fagin toward the kitchen. "Two coffees on the double. I'd like to have these deadbeats in and out before the lunch crowd arrives."

When Browner and the blonde woman were seated in the farthermost booth, he asked, "Now can you tell me what you want?"

She reached into her small black handbag. "Here's my card."

The card read simply *Hazel Hodapp, McNider Foundation.*

He looked it over twice, checked the backside, then tapped the card on his chin. "So?"

"The foundation was set up, very secretly, late in the nineteenth century," she explained. "By Joshua McNider."

"Who was?"

Hazel smiled thinly. "A man who had $9 million to donate to the setting up of a foundation," she replied. "He was interested in the occult

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sciences and believed that the so-called black arts might be used to do good."

"Wait a minute. I remember a piece about McNider in *Historical Americana* years ago. He . . . thanks."

A gaunt, fearful waitress had placed two cups of coffee down on their table. Leaning close to him, she whispered, "Whatever you do, don't order the rhubarb pie."

"Weren't planning to," he assured her. "Joshua McNider was a famous spiritualist. His neighbors up in Massachusetts called him Blackheart McNider and swore the man was a warlock."

"He made his money from oil. Spiritualism was merely a sideline."

"The article implied he was much more than —"

"Every year we select fifteen deserving creative people and award them foundation grants."

He straightened up. "Grants? Are you alluding to money? How much?"

"There's no money involved," Hazel told him. "What we grant is success."

"Success in copywriting, you mean? Listen, I don't think I want that."

"Don't be such a bonehead, Browner. As you were just saying to Dr. Muldoon, you've had to postpone your real writing career in order to —"

"Whoa now. How do you know what I —"

"Let's stick to the point," she cut in. "It's been decided — and I have nothing to do with that part of the process. To me you're too much of a screwup to bother with. Anyway, it has been decided that you have the potential for much more success than you've been able to achieve thus far. The McNider Foundation is now going to see you get it."

He leaned back, smiling ruefully. "Gomez, huh?"

"What?"

"It's Rudy Gomez, the art director I work with at Forman & McCay. He hired you to play a prank on me."

"This isn't a prank, putz."

"Sure, it is. Nobody would simply pick my name out of a hat, and then promise —"

"You were carefully selected. Trust me."

"How'd they do it?"

"We use a combination of advanced computer technology, divination and psychic precognition." She pulled her notebook from her handbag and

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opened it to a page flagged with a yellow Post-it slip. "Taken into consideration was your writing back in your college lit magazine — putrid junk in my opinion, but then, as I mentioned, I'm not on the damn selection committee. Plus the unproduced plays you turned out while you were scuffling in Manhattan back during your twenties, and the six unsold novels you've written in your spare time since you settled in Connecticut."

"How could Gomez know about all that stuff?"

"He doesn't. Now stop being a doink and pay attention," she advised. "We have to go over our agenda."

"Agenda for what?"

"Your climb to success obviously, bonehead."

Browner took a sip of his coffee by mistake, winced, set the cup back down. "Look, I'm not feeling all that well," he said. "Why don't we quit this? I thought maybe, rube that I am, that you really might have something to give me. You know, a check for $1,000."

"You're going to make millions, that's how this works."

"Oh, I'm going to make millions, huh? And what does your foundation get out of that?"

"We're altruistic. That's in our charter," Hazel informed him. "Besides, if we don't carry out the work of the foundation exactly as specified, we catch hell from McNider."

"There's still a relative involved?"

"I meant Joshua McNider himself," she said. "I'll go into that later."

"Well, thanks for your interest, Miss Hodapp." He shook his head. "But I think I'll pass on the whole idea, O.K.?"

"You can't."

"I can if I want to."

"Nope, Neddy," she assured him. "Once you're selected, that's it. There's absolutely no turning back."

"Nobody calls me Neddy." Absently he tried the coffee again. "I'm going home now, take my pills and crawl into bed."

"You don't have the flu."

"You figure it's something worse?"

"No, I mean we cured it."

"The McNider Foundation can get rid of a virus?"

"All part of the service. Put your hand on your forehead."

He did that. "I don't feel feverish or clammy."

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She held out her pocket mirror. "Look at your tongue."

He did that. "No more green fuzz."

"Your bowels are cured, too. So —"

"Aha! Got you!" cried Fagin triumphantly from beneath a table. "Die, you little . . . whatever it is you are. Rat probably."

Hazel rested her elbows on the table. "As to Juney."

"June. You know about my wife, too?"

"Don't let this business with Gordon Bellgrass bother you anymore."

"Gordon Bellgrass is our accountant. Why —"

"Oops." Smiling apologetically, Hazel turned to another page in her book. "I'm getting slipshod, Teddy. I assumed you already knew about —"

"It's Neddy. I mean Ned."

"It says right here, after all, that you don't know she's fooling around with him. I slipped up, sorry."

"June is faithful, completely so!" He gripped the table edge, getting residual gravy on his fingers.

"But it would bother you, if you knew. Distract you from your work, right?"

"Bellgrass is twenty-six at the most. He's still got acne. June would never —"

"Let me double-check this next one." Hazel scanned a few lines of shorthand. "You don't know about Joe Bryan either?"

"Joe Bryan . . . is my closest friend in Brimstone."

"He's also one of your wife's closest friends."

"This is crazy. June's home every night, so how could she —"

"People, Ned, can fool around by day. Why don't you drop by the soup kitchen sometime?"

"Are you implying June is having an affair with somebody there, too?"

"Nope, I'm stating she doesn't go near the place at all. Hasn't for about three months."

"I don't believe any of —"

"We're going to take care of things, so you won't be distracted."

"Take are of what things?"

"Cuckolds, we've found, don't produce literature of the highest quality."

"I'm not a cuckold," he insisted loudly.

"Don't be too sure," said Fagin, who was carrying something wrapped in paper napkins off toward the kitchen.

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Browner stood. "Just, please, leave me alone, Miss Hodapp."

"We can't. You're part of the system now, as I explained earlier," she told him patiently. "I'll drop by your place tonight at eight."

"No, I don't want you upsetting June with —"

"June won't be home tonight. There's an emergency meeting of the church floral committee." She smiled up at him. "At least that's what she's going to tell you."

"I don't want you dropping by even if —"

"Start thinking about what you want to write first. Play or novel."

"I have to go back to the agency tomorrow — or the next day at the latest. There are three FatZo television commercials overdue."

"You don't work at Forman & McCay anymore."

He sat. "What?"

"The agency has been bought by a German conglomerate and they've ordered an immediate cut of 22 percent in staff," she informed him. "You're out."

"Is this part of your prank?"

"There'll be a message on your tape when you get home." She shut her notebook. "But there's really no need to fret, Ned, because you're on the rise."

"I'm unemployed," he said forlornly, drinking the cold coffee down in one swig.

THERE WAS indeed a message from the agency on the answering machine in the kitchen, from McCay himself. He said exactly what Hazel Hodapp predicted he was going to say.

Sinking into a chair at the big butcher-block table, Browner remembered the free samples he'd been given by Dr. Muldoon. "Better take one," he suggested to himself.

He got up, headed for the sink. But then he realized that he really wasn't sick at all. He felt fine, physically anyway.

He sat down once more.

He was still slumped there, chin resting on his fist, when his wife came home fifteen minutes later.

She was pale, disheveled, sobbing. "Ned, it's awful," she said, pausing in the doorway."

"You heard already?" He rose up. "Well, don't worry, June, I've got quite

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a lot of severance pay coming."

"What in the hell are you nattering about?"

"My job. I just found out that —"

"Screw your job. Gordon Bellgrass is dead."

"Bellgrass, huh?" He sat once more. "What happened?"

"It was horrible. He was struck by lightning."

"How could he be struck by lightning? In order to be struck by lightning there has to be an electrical storm going on."

"This is no time for one of your nit-picking arguments, Ned. Gordon was struck by a huge bolt of sizzling blue lightning and — My God, it killed the poor boy instantly."

"Was he standing under a tree? Lots of times —"

"He happened to be in his bedroom."

"How'd you find out about this?"

"I'd dropped by to give him some tax forms from the church that Father Bud wanted him to see."

He watched her sobbing in the doorway. "You're taking it pretty hard."

"He's been our accountant for nearly two years after all."

"True, yet —"

"I'm going upstairs to lie down."

"Probably a good idea. Losing an accountant can be very traumatic sometimes," he said. "My flu is gone, by the way."

"Honestly, Ned. Here a man's dead and you're complaining about being sick."

"Actually I was saying that I *wasn't* sick," he told her. "You'd better take it easy for the rest of the day. Not planning to go out anywhere this evening, were you?"

"As a matter of fact, I have to go by church for a couple hours."

"But you're in mourning for —"

"This is the floral committee, Ned. I'm the chairperson and I promised Father Bud." Sniffling, she vacated the doorway and headed upstairs.

Browner went over to the phone and called the agency in New York City.

"Forman & McCay. Good morning. No, make that afternoon. Shit, excuse it. I've just been fired and I'm a little rattled," said the switchboard operator.

"You, too, Nan?"

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"Did they let you go, Ned?"

"As of today, yeah."

"And you at death's door with the darn flu."

"It's cleared up pretty well, actually. Is Gomez around?"

"I don't think he's gone to lunch yet. I'll put you through."

After three rings, the art director answered. "Gomez here."

"You been laid off?"

"Nope, I survived the purge. Proving that talent will out. How's your malady?"

"Not serious. Listen, Rudy, have you been playing a practical joke on me today?"

"I haven't, no. I never kick a man when he's down."

"Then you haven't sent a woman around to pretend she's something she's not?"

"You sure you're not delirious with fever?"

"She's a blonde with a sort of crew cut. Pretty but stark. Claims her name is Hazel."

"Doesn't sound like anybody I know. What exactly has —"

"This is all very unsettling."

"I don't think I'm following the drift of this discourse, old buddy."

"Never mind," he told his friend. "It just may be that all this is really happening."

"Take a couple of aspirins and call me in the morning," advised Gomez.

Legs crossed, wearing a different but equally expensive black suit, Hazel Hodapp was sitting on the sofa in Browner's living room with her notebook open on her lap. "I told you she wouldn't be home," she said. "Now, have you made up your mind about —"

"Bellgrass was struck by lightning."

"Oh, is that how they did it? Nobody told me what method they were going to use."

"You're actually claiming responsibility for the poor guy's death?"

"I told you, the foundation felt you'd be distracted by your wife's flagrant affair with him."

"It wasn't blatant. I didn't even know about it until you brought the damn thing up. Fact is, I'm still not certain that —"

"Did *you* sob when you heard about his demise?"

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"No, but I'm —"

"Your wife did," Hazel pointed out. "We'll be taking care of Joe Bryan early next week. Let's hope Juney gets the message and doesn't take up with any —"

"Hey, you can't hit Joe with a bolt of lightning."

"Of course not. That would look funny," she acknowledged. "Joe Bryan will simply be transferred to Angola."

"The outfit he works for doesn't even have a branch office there."

"They will by next week. So what would you like to take a crack at first, Ned? Novel or play?"

"Neither. I simply want to live on my severance pay until I get a new job."

"You'll never get another job in advertising."

"Sure, I will."

She shook her head. "Recession. Your age. The embezzling."

"What embezzling? A copywriter isn't in a position to swipe money from an ad agency."

"That's what both Forman and McCay thought, and that's why they trusted you."

"I never stole a damn thing from them. Well, except paper clips and envelopes. Everybody does that, it doesn't rank as embezzling."

"You're lucky they're not going to do anything about the money, since they don't want a scandal right now or —"

"Are you telling me your foundation rigged things to look like —"

"Book or play?"

He walked over close to the sofa. "You claim you're out to help me. But all you've done so far is futz things up."

"Losing a dead-end job isn't anything to be sad about. And we cured your flu, didn't we?"

"It went away by itself. I'd like you to go away now."

"Can't. You've been chosen for the benevolence of the McNider Foundation."

Sighing, he dropped into a canvas chair and stared into the empty fireplace. "I started a couple new novels recently, but I'm not too enthusiastic about either one."

"Give me a title."

"Of which one?"

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"The one you like best."

He thought for a moment. *"Look Down on the Stars."*

"Unk," she observed. "What's it about?"

"It's a coming-of-age novel, looking back on my own college days. A sad romantic novel in the F. Scott Fitzgerald vein — only in tune with the 1990s sensibilities."

"Unk." She made a quick note in her book. "O.K., we'll get you a $200,000 advance on it. That's not large, but we want to start you off gradually."

"$200,000? From who?"

"We're undecided between Random House and Weinberg & Sampson. Any preference?"

"Who'll promote it better?"

"That won't matter, because once the news about your affair with Princess Rita breaks you'll get all sorts of free publicity. People will assume the thing is a roman à clef and rush out to snap it up."

"Wait." He rose, faced her. "Who the devil is Princess Rita?"

"Princess Rita of Ruritania. You've carried on a torrid affair with her for almost a year."

"Where did I carry that on? Here in the Nutmeg State or over in Ruritania — wherever the hell that is?"

"In Manhattan, in your Grammercy Park townhouse."

"Wasn't aware I had a townhouse."

Reaching into her handbag, she extracted a ring of three keys and tossed it to him.

He missed and they hit the coffee table, bouncing from there to the carpet. He left them there. "What's the princess look like?"

"Somewhat like the girl you had a crush on in junior high."

"Doris Lindquist? Princess Rita looks like Doris Lindquist?"

"Pretty close," she replied. "All right, Ned, if we go with Random House that $200,000 will have to come out of what they're planning to advance Rosco Nuffleman."

"Nuffleman writes the best selling police-procedural novels in America. Why would they deduct my money from his advance?"

"Well, if they actually paid him the $3 million for his next two books that they're contemplating, they wouldn't have a dime left for you," Hazel explained. "But they never will."

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"Are you planning to hit Nuffleman with lightning or ship him off to Angola?"

"The poor fellow has Heresheimer-Nordoff syndrome. He just found out this morning. By next week he'll have lost the capacity to plot."

"Dr. Muldoon didn't tell me it was that serious."

"He's not much of a doctor."

He pointed a finger at her. "Listen, Miss Hodapp," he said, voice rising, "it sounds to me, if anything you're telling me is true, that in order for me to succeed other people have to fail and suffer. Is that how this works?"

She gave him a pitying look. "That's how everything works," she said.

BROWNER'S CLIMB to success, with the help of the McNider Foundation, was impressive over the next few weeks. Random House bought *Look Down on the Stars* on the basis of a two-minute phone conversation with his new literary agent, Tricky Lenzer. They paid not $200,000 but $300,000.

While Browner was still working on the second draft of the first chapter, consulting the notes he'd abandoned some months earlier, the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Literary Guild and the Inspirational Book Club all bought it for substantial sums. It was also picked as a seléction of the War Book Club and the Green Thumb Garden Book Club. The Wheelan Studios, outbidding MGM and Paramount, paid $4 million for the motion-picture rights and agreed not to commence filming until six months after the Broadway musical based on *Look Down on the Stars* opened.

Ludd Parkins, who'd recently directed the hit musical version of *Hamlet*, entitled *I'll Have a Danish!*, was signed to direct and the famous team of Applebaum & Bodogg was selected to do the book and music.

"How'd you like to write the book for the musical?" Hazel asked Browner over the telephone one afternoon.

"I'm only on Chapter 4 of the damn novel, Hazel."

"You can knock this off in your spare time."

"I appreciate the thought, but —"

"Well, somebody's got to take over the job."

He hesitated before asking, "What's happened to Applebaum & Bodogg?"

"Suicide pact."

"I thought you promised me there'd be no more —"

"Ned, I swear this isn't our doing. The two of them just up and put their

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heads in the oven," she said. "It was because, so I hear, of the horrible reviews they got on *Call Me Mutt!*, their musical based on the old *Mutt & Jeff* comic strip. It closed out of town in Teaneck last night and —"

"If I don't write the book, lyrics and music — will the next writer signed on come to grief?"

"Hard to tell, Ned, but you know how rough show business can be."

He sighed. "O.K., O.K. I'll give it a try."

He wrote the book, the lyrics and most of the tunes before he finished the novel. Everybody loved it and Orlando Busino, the hottest operatic tenor in America, begged to be allowed to include two of the ballads on his new CD.

The musical, called *Look Down, Look Down!*, opened on Broadway three days after the novel hit the #1 spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The talk was that Browner's musical might earn both a Tony and a Pulitzer. Only Mintz & Wexler, whose musical version of H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* was doing sellout business, were serious competitors.

Then Mintz went suddenly berserk one afternoon in Central Park and started screaming about, "The curse of the demon!" before climbing up into a tree. Somehow in subduing him, the police managed to break his neck. Wexler didn't attend his longtime partner's funeral and there were rumors that, availing himself of a favor from a friend in the U.S. Senate, he was now living in the Midwest under some sort of witness-protection plan.

Browner did get all the awards for the musical and he was also nominated for an Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America and a Nebula by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. The fact that his novel was not a mystery, a fantasy or a tale of sci fi didn't seem to bother anyone. The popular favorite for the Edgar was Elektra Marie Googins, whose *A Twist of the Knife* was the brilliant culmination of a forty-year career. A week before the awards banquet, however, she issued a statement declaring that all awards were foolish and overblown examples of the crass state publishing was currently in and that she wouldn't accept one if offered it. Two days after that she disappeared from the face of the earth.

Just after Browner collected his Edgar Allan Poe statuette, Hazel had informed him that the foundation had decided that June was still a serious stumbling block on his road to further success.

"No!" he hollered into the phone. "She may fool around now and then,

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but she's otherwise loyal and supportive."

"Not hard to pretend to be supportive of a guy who's pulling down $12 million per year."

"We just bought this new mansion, Hazel. Let us enjoy the damn place and —"

"We'll keep her alive, Ned. And she can spend her leaves with you."

"Leaves?"

"She's just been selected to participate in the astronaut program."

"How come she hasn't mentioned it?"

"She won't find out until Thursday. It's part of a brand-new government program to have a real estate broker take part in a manned spaceflight."

"I never heard of any such pro —"

"Just passed a couple weeks ago."

"With the help of your lobbyists?"

"Quite possibly," she admitted. "Oh, and start making notes on a Nobel acceptance speech. You're probably going to be getting it for lit."

"I don't deserve that. I didn't even deserve the goddamn Pulitzer," he told her. "Besides, I heard that Giacomo Macri is a sure thing for the next Nobel in Literature. He's been writing for sixty-three years, living in abject poverty, garnering —"

"The judges aren't likely to give it to the old boy after they see those photos in next week's *National Intruder*."

"Photos of his doing what?"

"You don't want to know."

"The man lives a monastic life in Milan. He's written seven one-thousand-page novels about the life of Christ and his disciples."

"That's what makes these revelations so shocking. Bye."

When Hazel dropped by the following week to inform him the Nobel was now cinched, Browner insisted he didn't want it. And told her that the terrible things they kept doing to his potential rivals had to stop. He couldn't live with the murder and ruin they were causing.

"You still don't comprehend, Neddy. The McNider Foundation doesn't go out and bump anybody off," she said, leaning back on his immense black leather sofa, crossing her legs and smiling patiently at him. "We simply manipulate probabilities some."

"Well, quit manipulating," he said. "I want to give up my grant from you people."

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"Don't be a pinhead and start that again."

"Suppose I go public? Tell somebody what's really behind my success?"

"Who'd you tell first?"

"I don't know. Probably a reporter. Somebody on CNN maybe."

"He or she would lose his or her job before ever facing a camera with the report."

"You can arrange that, too?"

"Obviously."

"I could start small then. Write a letter to the *Brimstone Pilot.*"

"It'll burn to the ground before the paper gets distributed."

"O.K., forget the public confession. How about my —"

"Oh, that reminds me. You can also forget about William F. Norgran."

"Who?"

"Norgran, the Manhattan private eye. Are you pretending you didn't hire that bonehead to find out more about the McNider Foundation?"

"O.K., I did, sure. I want to know where you're located, who's behind you, how to contact them and persuade them to lay off me."

"Dumb move."

He watched her for several silent seconds. "What's happened to Norgran?"

She glanced at her watch. "He just . . . nope, not for two minutes yet."

"What do you mean?"

"He's going to be involved in an awful smashup on the Garden State Parkway."

"What the hell is he doing in New Jersey?"

"Following a false lead, the dimbbulb." She checked her watch again. "Bingo."

"What's the bingo for?"

"To indicate that Norgran just had his fatal collision. Driver of the milk truck died, too."

"Damn it," he shouted at her, "you can't keep doing this."

"Yes, we can."

After the Nobel Prize announcement and his attempted flight, he made up his mind about what he'd have to do to keep any more people from being hurt.

He didn't bother to leave a note.

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Nobody, he realized after thinking about it for a while, would believe his reasons for doing himself in anyway.

His wife had left a bottle of powerful sleeping pills in the medicine cabinet before embarking for the astronaut training center. Browner was sure there were sufficient left to end his life.

Late on a bleak, rainy afternoon he swallowed the pills with a glass of Deer Park sparkling mineral water.

Taking off his shoes, he settled on the sofa. Gradually he felt himself being pulled down into sleep.

The phone rang.

After the fourth ring, his answering tape kicked in. "This is Ned Browner. Leave a message."

"It's Hazel, Neddy. Afraid I have bad news," she said. "The McNider Foundation has decided to withdraw its support. As of midnight you're on your own. Been nice working with you. Bye."

He was free. Nobody else would have to die so that he could succeed.

He was free, but he was sinking into a coma.

Struggling, Browner managed to roll off the sofa and hit the floor with a jolting thud.

"All you have to do," he told himself, "is crawl over to the phone and call for help."

He began, growing groggier and groggier, the long slow crawl across the tan carpeting to the distant phone.

He wasn't at all certain that he'd succeed.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Thief of Always: A Fable, Clive Barker (HarperCollins, cloth, 240pp, $20; special limited edition, $100)

HARVEY SWICK is bored, and wishes something would happen. Of course something does happen: a strange fellow named Rictus invites Harvey to come visit a marvelous house. And when Harvey gets there, the house really is straight from a child's dream. Each day recapitulates a year: Springtime in the morning, summer at noon, Halloween in the evening, and Christmas every night. The food is astonishingly good, and there are some good friends to play with.

But of course all is not what it seems. For instance, where are the owners of all the discarded items of children's clothing lying around? What is wrong with the strange sick-looking lake just down the hill from the house? Why can't they find the way off the grounds? And when Harvey and his best friend start getting magical help for the Halloween "pranks" they pull on each other, things quickly get out of hand.

It's a bad sign when a children's book begins with a child whose sole defining attribute is that he is bored. And when I kept thinking "of course" with each new plot turning, I feared that this cliched and ineffective opening meant that Barker was making the common mistake of thinking that when you're writing a children's book you don't have to be as inventive or careful or perceptive as you do when writing for adults; the truth is the opposite, that children are a much more demanding audience and they can see when an adult writer is faking it.

And Barker *is* faking it, as far as the character of Harvey Swick is concerned. Later in the book it becomes quite clear that to achieve what he needs to achieve, Harvey must be a very unusual person. Yet Barker gives us no clue, at the beginning or elsewhere, of any preexisting attribute, thought, experience,

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goal, memory, or attitude of Harvey's except that he was bored. He springs from nowhere; his character consists only of what he does in the story itself.

As one of Gilda Radner's characters used to say, "Never mind." This is not a character story, after all, it's Romance, and so it's acceptable for Harvey to be no more than what he does. The star of this story isn't the Nice Kid Who Saves Everybody, after all. As one would expect of a Barker tale, the story revolves around a genuinely marvelous evil being and his equally fascinating cohorts. The basic storyline could be viewed as a series of cliches; but it could just as easily be seen as a retelling of powerful universal myths, and by the end that is just how I came to see it. Just as with *The Great and Secret Show*, Barker's inventive milieu and eccentric characters more than make up for predictable storylines and neon moral reasoning. The story works, and you will not soon forget the memories that Barker puts into your mind.

I only wish that Barker had not labeled this book, on the cover or in his own mind, as "A Fable." The story did not need to have more stuff happen in it, but it did cry out for the main character to be more deeply individuated, and his reconciliation with his family is so evocative that I only wished I had actually known the characters well. Yet my very frustration that the book was not *more* is proof, to me anyway, that what the book already is, is enough to be noteworthy.

Civilization, Sid Meier (Microprose Software, about $50); *The Official Guide to Sid Meier's Civilization*, Keith Ferrell (Compute Books, 233pp, packaged with special "collector's edition" of game); *Civilization, or Rome on 640K a Day*, Johnny L. Wilson & Alan Emrich (Prima, 374pp, $18.95)

It was in order to play this game that computers were invented. All the other uses of a computer are just to provide you with a public excuse for all the money you spent to buy the machine.

You think I'm joking. You think I'm exaggerating. But if you, as I, are one of those who is an absolute devotee of "sweep-of-time" stories — Asimov's *Foundation*, Aldiss's *Helliconia*, for instance — the game of *Civilization* is in many ways the ultimate experience. No, the game can't match the detailed stories with their unforgettable characters. But the game *can* put you inside a millennia-long history where your own choices and efforts will give shape to human life.

It's a world that never existed before (though there is an option to

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play on Earth), and you start in 4000 B.C. with a tribe of nomads. You settle down, form a city, and then begin expanding. As you found more cities, you might build wonders of the world like the Pyramids or the Hanging Gardens (each of which has useful effects on the play of the game), or you could send out explorers or armies to discover or conquer other rising civilizations. Along the way you work to increase your knowledge, starting with the invention of the wheel or the alphabet and moving on, eventually, to gunpowder or philosophy, mass production or nuclear fusion.

The game is definitely science fiction — for instance, one of the ways to win is to build and launch a spaceship that will colonize another world before your rivals can get there. It can also be played as a no-holds-barred wargame. More than almost any other game I've played, this one reflects your choices, your character, and each time you play it you can make it different. At my house there are several dedicated civiacs (players of *Civilization*), and just as many winning styles. Some concentrate on rapid expansion and conquest, often conquering the entire world before the 15th century A.D.; others carefully build up a civilization to a fever-pitch of productivity, only developing militarily enough to defend against aggressive rivals, while sending out spies to learn what they can from other civilizations. It is a measure of Sid Meier's game design skill that both strategies work very well.

Civilization is also a powerful teaching tool; you not only get to play through the sweep of history, you also get some useful insights about how history works. Of course, to make the game playable, Meier had to simplify. Religion seems to be the "opiate of the masses" (though, despite Marx's flippancy, religion — especially state-sponsored religion — *has* had a powerful unifying effect on people, allowing communities to pull together in times of hardship or challenge). A belching smokestack sums up pollution, yet it's a recycling center and mass transit, neither of which deals with smokestacks, which are used to prevent pollution from causing global warming and wrecking your civilization.

There are ideological issues, too. Meier clearly believes in the potential of nuclear power, and while the cost of using nuclear weapons is high — too high, in fact, and we have all learned not to use them if we want a decent score — the game *does* allow you to use them, sparingly, without ending the world, though an all-out nuclear exchange essentially puts the whole world back into, if not the stone age, then a pretty tough struggle to survive.

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But setting aside quibbles — or even serious ideological arguments — the fact is that when you play *Civilization* you do get a genuine experience in the interrelatedness of various nations and cultures across time. Most important to me is the fact that, even as you are given the standard image of unending progress in science and technology, each new discovery arising out of those that came before, the fundamental human nature never changes one bit. Legions may have been replaced by armored knights and then by tanks, but they're still trying to blast you to bits. And in governments that are responsible to the people, the need to keep the people happy can often hamstring you, making it difficult to conduct a "sensible" foreign policy; yet autocratic governments, while more "efficient," end up presiding over far less productive citizens and eventually cannot compete against the democracies (unless, of course, they crushed the democracies militarily first). These are lessons that would be useful indeed to company managers or school administrators who cannot conceive of the benefits of dealing democratically with their unruly, ill-disciplined, feisty, creative employees or children, and then wonder why their "efficient" management gets such sluggish results.

But you won't be playing *Civilization* for the lessons; you'll be playing it for experience. The game is complicated, till you get the feel of it, and the manual leaves out a lot of helpful information. I recommend that you lay hands on either of the two books listed in the heading of this review. The Ferrell book (yes, he is the editor of *Omni*), is bundled with special recent editions of the game — it will say so on the box. The Wilson & Emrich volume can be purchased in stores and is the more conveniently organized, though the Ferrell is a more enjoyable straight-through introduction.

I only wish that the gamewright had built into the game a way to customize the names of your rivals, their empires, and their cities — it can get tedious (and confusing, when you play one game after another) to have the same German, French, Egyptian, Chinese, Zulu, Aztec, or Babylonian cities again and again. Feeling somewhat bold, I used Norton's Diskedit to break into my copy of the game and rename some of the nations, somewhat satirically, I must confess, so that now I play against King Zookeeper of the Mammals, with cities like Elephant, Hippo, and Mouse; or Anatomy of the Bodyparts, with cities named Stomach, Elbow, and Toe; or Scribe of the Authors, with cities like Homer, Shakespeare, and Goethe.

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But most people probably don't need such childish amusements. . .

I must warn you. *Civilization* will be compulsive for people who, like me, hunger for the sweep-of-time experience. Literary works like *Helliconia* and *Foundation* are few and far between. You can find yourself brooding about your game even when you're not playing it, just the way some books keep intruding into your thoughts even when you're not actually reading them. But the sense of satisfaction when you emerge unscathed at the end of six thousand years of history, with your people in possession of the secrets of the universe and with a colony on another world, cannot be had through any other means. Not even in the real world, for the great secret virtue of this game is that you get to see the process through from beginning to end, a privilege that most great leaders of history have been denied.

The Harvest, Robert Charles Wilson (Bantam, cloth and trade paper, 395pp, $22.50 and $11)

Perhaps because Stephen King's *The Stand* was such a powerful experience, it looms large enough in memory that when another author shows a world in which most people suddenly die and the handful of survivors must make some kind of life for themselves, it is almost impossible *not* to compare it to *The Stand*. The comparison is usually unfair—one of King's three best works (the other two being *in my opinion, of course, The Dead Zone* and *Misery*), *The Stand* overpowers most wannabes.

But Wilson is not a King wannabe, and *The Harvest* holds its own.

Where King killed off most people with a runaway disease, what happens in *The Harvest* is voluntary. Alien spaceships appear and, without explanation, put strange installations in major cities around the world. This in itself has an intimidating effect, but so far we are on traditional sf ground.

It is when the aliens invade human dreams and offer us perfect immortality, no strings attached, with only the minor price of losing our corruptible physical bodies, that the story takes its strange turning. Most people accept, and thereby enter into a kind of platonic heaven; they become contemplative, disconnecting from physical reality. They fade. A few linger, to taste the last bits of untasted human experience. But even they will go.

What then of those who said no to the alien dreams? Who are these human beings who turn down eternal life and absolute communion with their fellow beings? Let's just say that not all of them are nice; and

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yet, in the effort to reinvent civilizations from the ground up, they don't do too badly.

The Harvest in some ways is just as overtly religious and allegorical as *The Stand*. But here the finger of God does not come down and destroy the bad guys in the final contest between good and evil. Rather the well-intentioned god-figure of this novel — the aliens — has a tough time figuring out human beings, and blunders a little. And what the survivors salvage, they salvage for themselves. They all have the air of the people in the neighborhood of Mount St. Helen's who refused to leave and are now no more than hollow spots in ten feet of ash — for some reason, death was less fearful to them than change. Yet there's a kind of unintelligible nobility in that, and Wilson makes it, in the end, intelligible.

Of course *The Harvest* has Wilson's incomparable writing. Of course the characters are deeply and intelligently and compassionately explored. And there are images that you will never forget, of used-up discarded bodies, of giant mushrooms striding the highways of America, of the storm to end all storms as the aliens readjust the Earth. It all combines into a graceful and brilliant whole.

Wilson owes nothing to King in this novel; rather he went back to King's source — the idea of the rapture, of the end of the world — and put his own incomparable spin on it. *The Harvest* casts too much light of its own to stand for even a moment in the shadow of any other book. If anything, the shadow is cast the other way.

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About "Standards and Practices," Barry writes, "At the half-century celebration for my wonderful friend, the psychiatrist and writer, Arlene Heyman, I met a man in his sixties, a one-time junior member of the Kennedy Administration who made me call to mind someone's line about Oliver Cromwell: 'I wish I were as sure about anything as he is about everything.' At length our discussion lurched from Kennedy politics and into modern fiction and poetry, don't ask me how, and the difficulty of the markets therefrom. 'Well, you can do it Emily Dickinson's way,' I said, 'you can just write and bury the work, not deal with the market at all.' 'Ah,' my friend said, 'Emily Dickinson has nothing to do with the West Side of Manhattan in 1992, don't you think?' 'No,' I said, 'and I'm going to write a story and prove otherwise and send it to you when it's published in about a year.'"

Standards & Practices

By Barry N. Malzberg

EMILY DICKINSON could sense her options winding down. The biological clock in the first place, 37 years old now and no child, no husband, not even a man about whom she could fantasize; then too on all other fronts her life seemed to have become sallow, wasted. The City University was cutting back now even on the adjunct positions; the building management had made specious "improvements" to her studio and had socked her with a twenty-eight-dollar-a-month increase. Everywhere she turned this sullen October she felt the sense of her imprisonment ever more palpable. Staring down 85th Street at the Hudson, looking at the fireball sun collapse unevenly behind the monstrous buildings of Fort Lee, New Jersey, Emily felt as if she herself were sinking, as if —

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That enormous ball; unbuckled to its waist
Charmless, the suitor beckoning to his celestial hutch
As if not embrace but the stone grave without haste
Awaited those kissing — beckoning — unguent clutch.

And the poetry was not going well either; ever since Howard Moss had died the *New Yorker* had been closed to her. *Epoch*, the *Massachusetts Review* were not even postage money and after the little flurry surrounding her first book, a close runner-up for the Lamont Moss had told her, and a one-thousand-dollar grant from the Academy of Arts & Letters, she had been unable to attract any interest in what she felt was her far stronger second collection, now going the contest circuit after five years of failing to find even Capra or Swallow Press. Of course the poetry had never been anything which she could have taken seriously, it had been as her brother Austin had told her so many years ago "a very nice outlet" and that was about all but it was frustrating to find even this closed off to her now. But the men situation was worse; after the little thing she had had going with Oliver hit or miss for a couple of years, at least he had been predictable and she could count on him to do nothing crazy, after that had come to a quick truncation with Oliver's on-line management shifting half the company, bang! Like that to Santa Fe, she had had no man in her life at all. Not that she could gird herself to the seeking. Where were they? They were all married or gay or crazy or some combination of the three and then too there was the lurking possibility of AIDS with anyone at any time, that —

Small bite, the grand and sweeping unbuttoning
In corridors far and dense, the swoon of gluttony
Unappeased by that darker fear; grave to grave
We travel and only that dreaming bite become our nave.

You perhaps reached that point, close to 40 or a little beyond, where all of your plans and scuttling for possibility seem only to have led to this West Side of replication and loss, the dropping of the sun into the river prefiguring the fall of her own life. And yet Emily was not able to accept this, had not come from Amherst to Mount Holyoke to work-study to her marginal academic career in New York to give it all up at the age of 38. There were possibilities, she had not utterly lost her looks, was this not the age of

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millennial possibility? Girded by thoughts like this to say nothing of her own determination, Emily Dickinson resolved to find some recovered possibility in her life, to unleash —

As if in concourse meadow — the touch of the stones
Thunderous in that creating storm — oh with hand
Unbent in the nave, hearing His groans
Thunderous in the surprising concourse of his hand.

Remembering her unsatisfactory experience in EST, the truly unsettling men she had met and the Saturdays spent in hard chairs listening to the shouting, fighting for control of her bladder, Emily elected to stay away from self-improvement yet could not resist taking a free interview with the Church of Latent Possibility situated at Times Square. Crisp in the denims of the Ocean Going Latitudes, the senior group of the Church, her interviewer efficiently took her biography, nodded sympathetically when Emily confided her unsatisfactory experiences with psychiatry, her sense of betrayal when Oliver had raised himself from the bed after their penultimate coupling to tell her that he was leaving town. "They always wait until after sex," Emily said bitterly, "if they have something awful to tell you. No matter who they are, that's how they handle it."

"Isn't that the truth?" the Ocean Going lieutenant said. Well groomed in her immaculate uniform, she reminded Emily of her mother back in Amherst, warning her that all men were swine, but only in the most sympathetic tones. "Will you want a full reconditioning?" the lieutenant said. "I think that would be best to turn your life around. It would be twenty sessions in ten weeks and then we'll reevaluate." When Emily said nothing, the lieutenant cleared her throat and said, "That would be one thousand dollars for the initial consultation and assignment. Of course we can work out terms."

Ancient Puritan warnings seemed to circulate in the abcess of memory within Emily's consciousness, along with the severe cast of her mother's features when she felt that Emily and Austin were, as her expression went, "going off" with her. "I don't think I can afford anything like that," Emily Dickinson said. "I was more or less just looking for some advice, maybe some kind of genial mixer, college graduates, young singles, like that —"

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"Well," the lieutenant said and paused. "Well, of course, there are functions such as that. But that must come later. After you're reestablished, after we've had a chance —"

"I'm sorry," Emily said. She pushed the hard chair away, retreated toward the door, trying to appear casual but aware that the lieutenant's features had shifted to a kind of dread and focused attentiveness. "I guess this wasn't for me after all. One thousand dollars for reconditioning. I mean, I don't want to be *reconditioned*, I'd just like a date or maybe a chance at a tenure track somewhere in the city, that's all. I'm afraid you take my ambitions as being too large. I'm 38 years old, it's really too late to be *reconditioned*." Feeling dignity flee along with any intimations of a more positive self-image, Emily stumbled through the door and into Times Square thinking: I have taken my life too seriously, it is time to establish some distance, some space between —

> The angels and the dust that surely comes for me
> Or the darkness and the cast light of lost possibility.

Emily attends the short-story reading at Symphony Space Theater on Broadway at 95th Street. In a packed theater of white West Siders and upwardly mobile singles or nearly attached she listens to stories of Flannery O'Connor, Woody Allen and Russell Bates as read by several actors, the only one she likes being Mary Sternhagen. The O'Connor strikes her as being needlessly morbid but when the old woman is shot dead the audience breaks into applause and Emily remembers that in modern criticism this act is conceived as being not murderous but sacramental. Repulsive as this may be, she has herself taught that interpretation at Hunter College not so many years ago. Now however she finds it difficult to take such bland assurances into an October night populated by her chattering, contented contemporaries and homeless people who sit on crates and mumble about money or the sonsofbitches. Emily finds herself approached and escorted by the man who had sat at her left during the reading, a short man with assassin's features who had kicked her once by accident and then when he had apologized had given her a longing but ambiguous look. Now he says that he is a clinical psychologist who does adjunct work at Einstein and consultations at Cornell as well as sustaining a small practice and he could see that she hated the O'Connor story as

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much as he did. He suggests that since they both seem to be unescorted they go to the Library Restaurant and have some dinner.

Emily knows that he is married and probably has at least two children and does not get along badly enough with his wife to make him even the vaguest of prospects. At 38 and in this city, granted her experience and that of her friends, she has all the intelligence and acuity she needs not to be murdered as a result of her own stupidity, but pushing him away now seems to require more energy than simply submitting. She is lonely and perhaps the oceangoers are right; she is in need of a thorough reconditioning. His name is Robert and he was struck right away by the sensitivity and intensity of her features, he would bet that she is creative in some ways, maybe even a writer. Is this true? By this time they are already seated in the restaurant. Emily talks about the City University but does not mention the poetry, that being the most private part of herself and in any event she is barely writing now. They talk amiably enough through and after dinner and now it is time to decide what to do. Not so many years ago, Emily thinks she might have had a somewhat wider series of choices or possibilities but this, of course, is the AIDS era and one does nothing on a first or even a fifteenth encounter until one has thoroughly researched the situation. She asks for Robert's phone number.

"Why don't you give me yours?" he says.

She does so. There is little enough at risk and she has a police lock, a doorman and an answering machine. "Now will you give me your number?" she says.

"It's easier for me to call you," Robert says. "I'm out a lot and having trouble on the line. You can reach me at Einstein on Tuesday afternoons late, usually and at Cornell on Saturday mornings."

Now she knows he is married. The near-disclosure is neither thunderous nor amusing, it is simply part of the landscape like the faded seats in the theater and the imploded sun collapsing into the foul Hudson. "Well," she says, "well, it's been nice talking with you. I have to teach an early class, though, so we'd best go." She puts a twenty-dollar bill on the table. "That should be fair," she says. "Take care of the check. Maybe I'll see you at the next reading. Maybe not." He looks at her silently, his face slightly abashed, a small boy perhaps caught fondling himself in the back of the classroom, under his desk. She walks out of the classroom as she had walked from the church a few days ago, her stride even, her legs curiously

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shaky, however. She has been walking out of too many places this way recently and for no apparent purpose. There is some air of finality in these places which she would like to think of as millennial but which she suspects has to do with her own age and condition.

Emily finds herself at a sports bar on upper Broadway, surrounded by singles, staring without much interest at a New York Rangers playoff game on five television sets suspended above the bar. Increasingly in these last weeks she has found herself in situations like these, after a long period when she had felt that all of this nonsense was behind her. It must have something to do with the season but then again Oliver's departure and failure to write may have had a greater effect upon her than she could have ever expected. The Rangers score a goal and lead 5-3 but St. Louis gets two late surprise goals to tie and then wins in the third minute of overtime, creating a mood in the sports bar which comes as close to ugly as affluent, cynical West Siders can be in the presence of an impersonal disaster. In all of this time, too, no one has spoken to her; she has sat at the bar invisibly and invisibly now she puts money on the bar. Has the long-feared collapse of all association come to her? Has she lost her looks, her soul or any sense of possibility? She does not know but preparing to leave the bar, Emily has a wild feeling of dislocation, it settles upon her like a cloak and she can feel the uneasy and uneven shifting within her heart. "Excuse me," a man says, brushing past her, waving at his date who seems to glow with necessity, her face suffused with love as she waves back. Emily has always feared her acuity, felt it as a curse but she has never known it to give her the kind of pain which she now feels. She is not a bad-looking woman, is she? Howard Moss had been enamored of her poetry and had actually taken three of her minor poems, then had maneuvered the Viking acceptance of the collection. All of that had been ten years ago, of course. Things change in ten years. In fact, things can become terminal in much less time than this, Emily thinks.

She leaves the bar, cries of revulsion toward the Rangers sounding behind her. She has the odd and irrational thought that perhaps she should call Robert after all, find him at Einstein on Tuesday and say, "All right, I'm not going anywhere either. Who are we kidding? You get a test and I'll have a test and if that works out we can have a wracking, pointless affair." She thinks of this, the thought of it almost palpable as she strides down

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Broadway, not looking at the beggars, not looking at the homeless clumped like bushes to the sidewalk, thinking that there are certain degrees of insight which are perhaps insupportable. Perhaps this explains why she has more or less ceased to write poetry and has sought advice in places like the Church of Latent Possibility, companionship from men like Robert, communion in spaces like the sports bar. She has become a version of herself she could not have imagined when she was that young woman at Holyoke twenty years ago, a feeling then as if —

> His Features — Tumultuous in the Night
> Came and embraced — made my frail gasps Wind —
> And in the harshness of the sudden Wind his light
> Touch and tumble were not then to Find —

And then again it may simply be, as her friends in Massachusetts had warned her when she came to take the adjunct post so many years ago, that life in New York would simply be insupportable.

At an end-of-semester party for the English Department staff and their significant others, Emily — who has invited and come with Robert but cannot now see him at the other side of the lounge, so packed is the room — is arguing, quite pointlessly, with a bearded lawyer, the husband of a medievalist, who says that he was never able to bear the work of William Wordsworth. "Or any of those mystic types," he says. "Blake or Donne. Or Edna St. Vincent Millay. There was a woman I could never stand. She was full of fairy tales and cheap gimmicks."

"I'm not sure," Emily says. She impulsively reaches out a soothing hand, strokes his elbow. There is nothing erotic in her touch and with his wife three feet away, no sense of possibility and they both know it. The gesture means nothing and is therefore safe. "I think that *Aria da Capo* is really quite charming," Emily says. "She has a lot to say about the fragility of fantasy, the extinguishment of hope, I think."

"Well," the lawyer says, "that may be what *you* think." He stares at the place on his jacket Emily had touched as if it were somehow engraved with meaning. "But I don't see it that way. I don't think that Edna St. Vincent Millay has anything to do with the West Side of Manhattan in 1992."

"Oh, I don't know," Emily Dickinson says. She suppresses a wild, a

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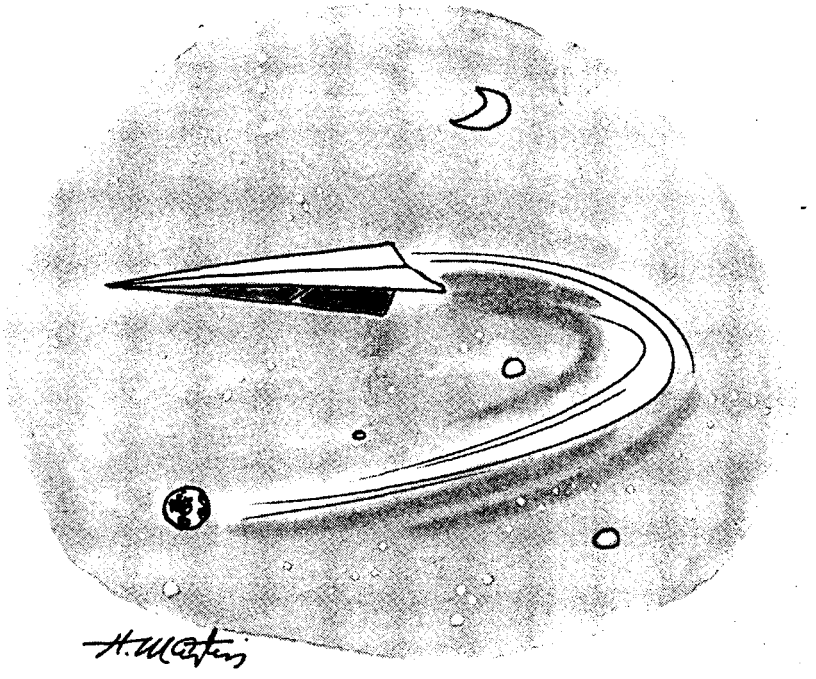
demonic urge to seize the lawyer's private parts and inflict knowledge upon them. "I mean, we can't be sure, can we?" She smiles at him and in the dense spaces of the room feels her heart, thundering and enormous, sway like a fruit in that interior orchard, the wind of knowledge coursing through her.

"I think she might be *very* relevant," Emily Dickinson says and thinks of Robert's helpless touch. "If you look for her, really look for her hard," she says.



1991 WINNER OF THE PAPER AIRPLANE CONTEST

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The Bloomsbury Review *has called Ed Gorman "the poet of dark suspense." Ed is a poet no matter what he writes. His stories are full of a gentle beauty and morality that most fiction strives for. He is best known for his mysteries, for which he won a Shamus for the Best Private Eye story, and has been nominated for both the Edgar and Anthony mystery awards. He has also written five western novels. "The last of which," he writes, "turned up a piece of research that detailed the life of a Confederate surgeon during the Civil War. I've never read anything more powerful or disturbing or moving." He translated that power and fascination into "The Face."*

The Face

By Ed Gorman

THE WAR WAS GOING badly. In the past month more than sixty men had disgraced the Confederacy by deserting, and now the order was to shoot deserters on sight. This was in other camps and other regiments. Fortunately, none of our men had deserted at all.

As a young doctor, I knew even better than our leaders just how hopeless our war had become. The public knew General Lee had been forced to cross the Potomac with ten thousand men who lacked shoes, hats and who at night had to sleep on the ground without blankets. But I knew —in the first six months in this post — that our men suffered from influenza, diphtheria, smallpox, yellow fever and even cholera; ravages from which they would never recover; ravages more costly than bullets and the advancing armies of the Yankees. Worse, because toilet and bathing facili-

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ties were practically nil, virtually every man suffered from tics and mites and many suffered from scurvy, their bodies on fire. Occasionally, you would see a man go mad, do crazed dances in the moonlight trying to get the bugs off him. Soon enough he would be dead.

This was the war in the spring and while I have here referred to our troops as "men," in fact they were mostly boys, some as young as thirteen. In the night, freezing and sometimes wounded, they cried out for their mothers, and it was not uncommon to hear one or two of them sob while they prayed aloud.

I tell you this so you will have some idea of how horrible things had become for our beloved Confederacy. But even given the suffering and madness and despair I'd seen for the past two years as a military doctor, nothing had prepared me for the appearance of the Virginia man.

On the day he was brought in on a buckboard, I was working with some troops, teaching them how to garden. If we did not get vegetables and fruit into our diets soon, all of us would have scurvy. I also appreciated the respite that working in the warm sun gave me from surgery. In the past week alone, I'd amputated three legs, two arms and numerous hands and fingers. None had gone well, conditions were so filthy.

Every amputation had ended in death except one, and this man — boy; he was fourteen — pleaded with me to kill him every time I checked on him. He'd suffered a head wound and I'd had to relieve the pressure by trepanning into his skull. Beneath the blood and pus in the hole I'd dug, I could see his brain squirming. There was no anesthetic, of course, except whiskey and that provided little comfort against the violence of my bone saw. It was one of those periods when I could not get the tart odor of blood from my nostrils, nor its feel from my skin. Sometimes, standing at the surgery table, my boots would become soaked with it and I would squish around in them all day.

The buckboard was parked in front of the General's tent. The driver jumped down, ground-tied the horses, and went quickly inside.

He returned a few moments later with General Sullivan and three men in familiar gray uniforms.

The entourage walked around to the rear of the wagon. The driver, an enlisted man, pointed to something in the buckboard. The General, a fleshy, bald man of fifty-some years, leaned over the wagon and peered in.

Quickly, the General's head snapped back and then his whole body fol-

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lowed. It was as if he'd been stung by something coiled and waiting for him in the buckboard.

The General shook his head and said, "I want this man's entire face covered. Especially his face."

"But, General," the driver said. "He's not dead. We shouldn't cover his face."

"You heard what I said!" General Sullivan snapped. And with that, he strutted back into his tent, his men following.

I was curious, of course, about the man in the back of the wagon. I wondered what could have made the General start the way he had. He'd looked almost frightened.

I wasn't to know till later that night.

My rounds made me late for dinner in the vast tent used for the officers' mess. I always felt badly about the inequity of officers having beef stew while the men had, at best, hardtack and salt pork. Not so bad that I refused to eat it, of course, which made me feel hypocritical on top of being sorry for the enlisted men.

Not once in my time here had I ever dined with General Sullivan. I was told on my first day here that the General, an extremely superstitious man, considered doctors bad luck. Many people feel this way. Befriend a doctor and you'll soon enough find need of his services.

So I was surprised when General Sullivan, carrying a cup of steaming coffee in a huge, battered tin cup, sat down across from the table where I ate alone, my usual companions long ago gone back to their duties.

"Good evening, Doctor."

"Good evening, General."

"A little warmer tonight."

"Yes."

He smiled dourly. "Something's got to go our way, I suppose."

I returned his smile. "I suppose." I felt like a child trying to act properly for the sake of an adult. The General frightened me.

The General took out a stogie, clipped off the end, sniffed it, licked it, then put it between his lips and fired it. He did all this with a ritualistic satisfaction that made me think of better times in my home city of Charleston, of my father and uncles handling their smoking in just the same way.

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"A man was brought into camp this afternoon," he said.

"Yes," I said. "In a buckboard."

He eyed me suspiciously. "You've seen him up close?"

"No. I just saw him delivered to your tent." I had to be careful of how I put my next statement. I did not want the General to think I was challenging his reasoning. "I'm told he was not taken to any of the hospital tents."

"No, he wasn't." The General wasn't going to help me.

"I'm told he was put under quarantine in a tent of his own."

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

He blew two plump white perfect rings of smoke toward the ceiling. "Go have a look at him, then join me in my tent."

"You're afraid he may have some contagious disease?"

The General considered the length of his cigar. "Just go have a look at him, Doctor. Then we'll talk."

With that, the General stood up, his familiar brusque self once again, and was gone.

The guard set down his rifle when he saw me. "Good evenin', Doctor."

"Good evening."

He nodded to the tent behind him. "You seen him yet?"

"No; not yet."

He was young. He shook his head. "Never seen anything like it. Neither has the priest. He's in there with him now." In the chill, crimson dusk I tried to get a look at the guard's face. I couldn't. My only clue to his mood was the tone of his voice — one of great sorrow.

I lifted the tent flap and went in.

A lamp guttered in the far corner of the small tent, casting huge and playful shadows across the walls. A hospital cot took up most of the space. A man's body lay beneath the covers. A sheer cloth had been draped across his face. You could see it billowing with the man's faint breath. Next to the cot stood Father Lynott. He was silver-haired and chunky. His black cassock showed months of dust and grime. Like most of us, he was rarely able to get hot water for necessities.

At first, he didn't seem to hear me. He stood over the cot torturing black rosary beads through his fingers. He stared directly down at the cloth draped on the man's face.

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Only when I stood next to him did Father Lynott look up. "Good evening, Father."

"Good evening, Doctor."

"The General wanted me to look at this man."

He stared at me. "You haven't seen him, then?"

"No."

"Nothing can prepare you."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

He looked at me out of his tired cleric's face. "You'll see soon enough. Why don't you come over to the officers' tent afterwards? I'll be there drinking my nightly coffee."

He nodded, glanced down once more at the man on the cot, and then left, dropping the tent flap behind him.

I don't know how long I stood there before I could bring myself to remove the cloth from the man's face. By now, enough people had warned me of what I would see that I was both curious and apprehensive. There is a myth about doctors not being shocked by certain terrible wounds and injuries. Of course we are but we must get past that shock — or, more honestly, put it aside for a time — so that we can help the patient.

Close by, I could hear the feet of the guard in the damp grass, pacing back and forth in front of the tent. A barn owl and then a distant dog joined the sounds the guard made. Even more distant, there was cannon fire, the war never ceasing. The sky would flare silver like summer lightning. Men would suffer and die.

I reached down and took the cloth from the man's face.

"What do you suppose could have done that to his face, Father?" I asked the priest twenty minutes later.

We were having coffee. I smoked a cigar. The guttering candles smelled sweet and waxy.

"I'm not sure," the priest said.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Never."

I knew what I was about to say would surprise the priest. "He has no wounds."

"What?"

"I examined him thoroughly. There are no wounds anywhere on his body."

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"But his face —"

I drew on my cigar, watched the expelled smoke move like a storm cloud across the flickering candle flame. "That's why I asked you if you'd ever seen anything like it."

"My God," the priest said, as if speaking to himself. "No wounds."

IN THE dream I was back on the battlefield on that frosty March morning two years ago when all my medical training had deserted me. Hundreds of corpses covered the ground where the battle had gone on for two days and two nights. You could see cannons mired in mud, the horses unable to pull them out. You could see the grass littered with dishes and pans and kettles, and a blizzard of playing cards — all exploded across the battlefield when the Union army had made its final advance. But mostly there were the bodies — so young and so many — and many of them with mutilated faces. During this time of the war, both sides had begun to commit atrocities. The Yankees favored disfiguring Confederate dead and so they moved across the battlefield with Bowie knives that had been fashioned by sharpening with large files. They put deep gashes in the faces of the young men, tearing out eyes sometimes, even sawing off noses. In the woods that day we'd found a group of our soldiers who'd been mortally wounded but who'd lived for a time after the Yankees had left. Each corpse held in its hand some memento of the loved ones they'd left behind — a photograph, a letter, a lock of blonde hair. Their last sight had been of some homely yet profound endearment from the people they'd loved most.

This was the dream — nightmare, really — and I'd suffered it ever since I'd searched for survivors on that battlefield two years previous.

I was still in this dream-state when I heard the bugle announce the morning. I stumbled from my cot and went down to the creek to wash and shave. The day had begun.

Casualties were many that morning. I stood in the hospital tent watching as one stretcher after another bore man after man to the operating table. Most suffered from wounds inflicted by minie balls, fired from guns that could kill a man nearly a mile away.

By noon, my boots were again soaked with blood dripping from the table.

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During the long day, I heard whispers of the man General Sullivan had quarantined from others. Apparently, the man had assumed the celebrity and fascination of a carnival sideshow. From the whispers, I gathered the guards were letting men in for quick looks at him, and the lookers came away shaken and frightened. These stories had the same impact as tales of spectres told around midnight campfires. Except this was daylight and the men — even the youngest of them — hardened soldiers. They should not have been so afraid but they were.

I couldn't get the sight of the man out of my mind, either. It haunted me no less than the battlefield I'd seen two years earlier.

During the afternoon, I went down to the creek and washed. I then went to the officers' tent and had stew and coffee. My arms were weary from surgery but I knew I would be working long into the night.

The General surprised me once again by joining me. "You've seen the soldier from Virginia?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you make of him?"

I shrugged. "Shock, I suppose."

"But his face —"

"This is a war, General, and a damned bloody one. Not all men are like you. Not all men have iron constitutions."

He took my words as flattery, of course, as a military man would. I hadn't necessarily meant them that way. Military men could be grossly vain and egotistical and insensitive beyond belief.

"Meaning what, exactly, Doctor?"

"Meaning that the soldier from Virginia may have become so horrified by what he saw that his face —" I shook my head. "You can see too much, too much death, General, and it can make you go insane."

"Are you saying he's insane?"

I shook my head. "I'm trying to find some explanation for his expression, General."

"You say there's no injury?"

"None that I can find."

"Yet he's not conscious."

"That's why I think of shock."

I was about to explain how shock works on the body — and how it

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could feasibly effect an expression like the one on the Virginia soldier's face — when a lieutenant rushed up to the General and breathlessly said, "You'd best come, sir. The tent where the soldier's quarantined — There's trouble!"

When we reached there, we found half the camp's soldiers surrounding the tent. Three and four deep, they were, and milling around idly. Not the sort of thing you wanted to see when there was a war going on. There were duties to perform and none of them were getting done.

A young soldier — thirteen or fourteen at most — stepped from the line and hurled his rifle at the General. The young soldier had tears running down his cheeks. "I don't want to fight any more, General."

The General slammed the butt of the rifle into the soldier's stomach. "Get hold of yourself, young man. You seem to forget we're fighting to save the Confederacy."

We went on down the line of glowering faces, to where two armed guards struggled to keep soldiers from looking into the tent. I was reminded again of a sideshow — some irresistible spectacle everybody wanted to see.

The soldiers knew enough to open an avenue for the General. He strode inside the tent. The priest sat on a stool next to the cot. He had removed the cloth from the Virginia soldier's face and was staring fixedly at it.

The General pushed the priest aside, took up the cloth used as a covering, and started to drop it across the soldier's face — then stopped abruptly. Even General Sullivan, in his rage, was moved by what he saw. He jerked back momentarily, his eyes unable to lift from the soldier's face. He handed the cloth to the priest. "You cover his face now, Father. And you keep it covered. I hereby forbid any man in this camp to look at this soldier's face ever again. Do you understand?"

Then he stormed from the tent.

The priest reluctantly obliged.

Then he angled his head up to me. "It won't be the same any more, Doctor."

"What won't?"

"The camp. Every man in here has now seen his face." He nodded back to the soldier on the cot. "They'll never be the same again. I promise you."

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In the evening, I ate stew and biscuits, and sipped at a small glass of wine. I was, as usual, in the officers' tent when the priest came and found me.

For a time, he said nothing beyond his greeting. Simply watched me at my meal, and then stared out the open flap at the camp preparing for evening, the fires in the center of the encampment, the weary men bedding down. Many of them, healed now, would be back in the battle within two days or less.

"I spent an hour with him this afternoon," the priest said.

"The quarantined man?"

"Yes." The priest nodded. "Do you know some of the men have visited him five or six times?"

The way the priest spoke, I sensed he was gloating over the fact that the men were disobeying the General's orders. "Why don't the guards stop them?"

"The guards are in visiting him, too."

"The man says nothing. How can it be a visit?"

"He says nothing with his tongue. He says a great deal with his face." He paused, eyed me levelly. "I need to tell you something. You're the only man in this camp who will believe me." He sounded frantic. I almost felt sorry for him.

"Tell me what?"

"The man — he's not what we think."

"No?"

"No; his face —" He shook his head. "It's God's face."

"I see."

The priest smiled. "I know how I must sound."

"You've seen a great deal of suffering, Father. It wears on a person."

"It's God's face. I had a dream last night. The man's face shows us God's displeasure with the war. That's why the men are so moved when they see the man." He sighed, seeing he was not convincing me. "You say yourself he hasn't been wounded."

"That's true."

"And that all his vital signs seem normal."

"True enough, Father."

"Yet he's in some kind of shock."

"That seems to be his problem, yes."

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The priest shook his head. "No, his real problem is that he's become overwhelmed by the suffering he's seen in this war — what both sides have done to the other. All the pain. That's why there's so much sorrow on his face — and that's what the men are responding to. The grief on his face is the same grief they feel in their hearts. God's face."

"Once we get him to a real field hospital —"

And it was then we heard the rifle shots.

The periphery of the encampment was heavily protected, we'd never heard firing this close.

The priest and I ran outside.

General Sullivan stood next to a group of young men with weapons. Several yards ahead, near the edge of the camp, lay three bodies, shadowy in the light of the campfire. One of the fallen men moaned. All three men wore our own gray uniforms.

Sullivan glowered at me. "Deserters."

"But you shot them in the back," I said.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, Doctor. The men were deserting. They'd packed their belongings and were heading out."

One of the young men who'd done the shooting said, "It was the man's face, sir."

Sullivan wheeled on him. "It was what?"

"The quarantined man, sir. His face. These men said it made them sad and they had to see families back in Missouri, and that they were just going to leave no matter what."

"Poppycock," Sullivan said. "They left because they were cowards."

I left to take care of the fallen man who was crying out for help.

IN THE middle of the night, I heard more guns being fired. I lay on my cot, knowing it wasn't Yankees being fired at. It was our own deserters.

I dressed and went over to the tent where the quarantined man lay. Two young farm boys in ill-fitting gray uniforms stood over him. They might have been mourners standing over a coffin. They said nothing. Just stared at the man.

In the dim lamplight, I knelt down next to him. His vitals still seemed good, his heartbeat especially. I stood up, next to the two boys, and looked

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down on him myself. There was nothing remarkable about his face. He could have been any of the thousands of men serving on either side.

Except for the grief.

This time I felt the tug of it myself, heard in my mind the cries of the dying I'd been unable to save, saw the families and farms and homes destroyed as the war moved across the countryside, heard children crying out for dead parents, and parents sobbing over the bodies of their dead children. It was all there in his face, perfectly reflected, and I thought then of what the priest had said, that this was God's face, God's sorrow and displeasure with us.

The explosion came, then.

While the two soldiers next to me didn't seem to hear it at all, I rushed from the tent to the center of camp.

Several young soldiers stood near the ammunition cache. Someone had set fire to it. Ammunition was exploding everywhere, flares of red and yellow and gas-jet blue against the night. Men everywhere ducked for cover behind wagons and trees and boulders.

Into this scene, seemingly unafraid and looking like the lead actor in a stage production of King Lear I'd once seen, strode General Sullivan, still tugging on his heavy uniform jacket.

He went over to two soldiers who stood, seemingly unfazed, before the ammunition cache. Between explosions I could hear him shouting. "Did you set this fire?"

And they nodded.

Sullivan, as much in bafflement as anger, shook his head. He signaled for the guards to come and arrest these men.

As the soldiers were passing by me, I heard one of them say to a guard, "After I saw his face, I knew I had to do this. I had to stop the war."

Within an hour, the flames died and the explosions ceased. The night was almost ominously quiet. There were a few hours before dawn, so I tried to sleep some more.

I dreamed of Virginia, green Virginia in the spring, and the creek where I'd fished as a boy, and how the sun had felt on my back and arms and head. There was no surgical table in my dream, nor were my shoes soaked with blood.

Around dawn somebody began shaking me. It was Sullivan's personal lieutenant. "The priest has been shot. Come quickly, Doctor."

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I didn't even dress fully, just pulled on my trousers over the legs of my long underwear. A dozen soldiers stood outside the tent looking confused and defeated and sad. I went inside.

The priest lay in his tent. His cassock had been torn away. A bloody hole made a target-like circle on his stomach.

Above his cot stood General Sullivan, a pistol in his hand.

I knelt next to the cot and examined the priest. His vital signs were faint and growing fainter. He had at most a few minutes to live.

I looked up at the General. "What happened?"

The General nodded for the lieutenant to leave.

The man saluted and went out into the gray dawn.

"I had to shoot him," General Sullivan said.

I stood up. "You had to shoot a priest?"

"He was trying to stop me."

"From what?"

Then I noticed for the first time the knife scabbard on the General's belt. Blood streaked its sides. The hilt of the knife was sticky with blood. So were the General's hands. I thought of how Yankee troops had begun disfiguring the faces of our dead on the battlefield.

He said, "I have a war to fight, Doctor. The men — the way they were reacting to the man's face —" He paused and touched the bloody hilt of the knife. "I took care of him. And the priest came in while I was doing it and went insane. He started hitting me, trying to stop me and —" He looked down at the priest. "I didn't have any choice, Doctor."

A few minutes later, the priest died.

I started to leave the tent. General Sullivan put a hand on my shoulder. "I know you don't care very much for me, Doctor, but I hope you understand me at least a little. I can't win a war when men desert and blow up ammunition dumps and start questioning the worthiness of the war itself. I had to do what I did. I hope someday you'll understand."

I went out into the dawn. The air smelled of campfires and coffee. Now the men were busy scurrying around, preparing for war. The way they had been before the man had been brought here in the buckboard.

I went over to the tent where he was kept and asked the guard to let me inside. "The General said nobody's allowed inside, Doctor."

I shoved the boy aside and strode into the tent.

The cloth was still over his face, only now it was soaked with blood. I

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raised the cloth and looked at him. Even for a doctor, the sight was horrible. The General had ripped out his eyes and sawed off his nose. His cheeks carried deep gullies where the knife had dug in deep.

He was dead. The shock of the defacement had killed him.

Sickened, I looked away.

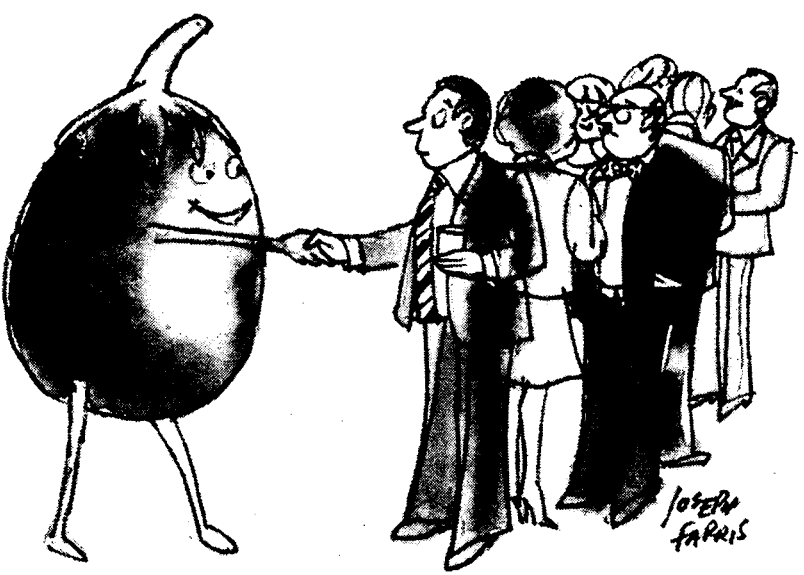
The flap was thrown back, then, and there stood General Sullivan. "We're going to bury him now, Doctor."

In minutes, the dead soldier was inside a pine box borne up a hill of long grass waving in a chill wind. The rains came, hard rains, before they'd turned even two shovelfuls of earth.

Then, from a distance over the hill, came the thunder of cannon and the cry of the dying.

The face that reminded us of what we were doing to each other was no more. It had been made ugly, robbed of its sorrowful beauty.

He was buried quickly and without benefit of clergy — the priest himself having been buried an hour earlier — and when the ceremony was finished, we returned to camp and war.



"At the risk of being redundant, I'm Mr. Eggplant.'

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"Rainbone" is a quiet story, the kind that resonates long after the reading is over. It also contains a gentle fantasy that Lisa Cohen seems to specialize in. Lisa is a Canadian writer with several fiction sales to Pulphouse *under her belt. She has been spending the last year working on a novel. When she is not at the keyboard, she publishes personalized children's books for her company, "Wonderkids." "Rainbone" marks her first appearance in F&SF.*

Rainbone

By Lisa R. Cohen

THUNDER RUMBLED kettledrums along the thin line of light at the edge of the world. Rainbone leaned back against the concrete wall of the mini-mart, his old bones pinging and cracking like a roadbed under the desert sun. He took a last drag of his cigarette before flicking it away. It bounced along the cool blue tarmac in a shower of red sparks. He sighed. Rose reached over and put a cold, dry hand on his thigh.

"What you thinking about, Mose?" she asked.

"Tucson," said Rainbone.

"Tucson? You said I had to go to Seattle," said Rose. "You said I had to keep my mind straight on that, or I might get lost again." Rainbone nodded.

"That's right," said Rainbone. "But I'm not so likely as you to get lost, am I?"

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Rose shrugged. Her face, half-painted with blue shadows, looked sulky.

"Well, it would be a whole hell of a lot easier if I wasn't the only one thinking on Seattle," she said. "You know how much I hate that place. My mind wants to skip over it like a needle off an old record. If it's so important, you ought to keep your mind straight, too."

"Don't worry," said Rainbone. "You're with me now. I won't let you get lost."

"I ain't worried, Rainbone," said Rose. "I don't care if we never get there. It's just, you said I had to keep my mind straight, so I think you should, too."

"All right," said Rainbone, The girl tired him out. He closed his eyes, thinking, "Seattle"; but still, it was the hot blue Arizona sky that opened up inside his head. The vision and the pepper-and-sage smell of the desert were so real, it was like he carried a piece of Arizona behind his eyes. The memory of it had never faded, even though it had been — what? — twenty? twenty-five years since he'd been there? That long. Sharon had been just a little girl then. He remembered he'd promised to bring her a piece of the petrified forest. Like something out of a fairy tale. But he'd never picked one up for her. Too many other things happening at once: Jenny Whitsock, the rainbone . . . and the family could always wait. So they always did. Until Rose had come to get him. He opened his eyes again.

In the far, flat distance, he could see the bouncing twin beams of a Greyhound bus. He looked around for Rose, but she'd gone off again. Or maybe his eyes weren't good enough anymore to pick her out among the blue-black shadows.

"Rose," he called, just to be sure. "Bus is comin'." No answer from the shadows. Hunching himself to his feet, he fished out a wad of money from his pants pocket, counted it carefully. It hadn't multiplied. There was $1,335 in fifties, twenties, and fives that he'd made shooting craps behind the Billiard Room. With Rose's help. He never would have made that much on his own and not lost it again soon after, going for the big stack.

The bus rolled up in a blaze of light and sighed to a stop in front of him. Rainbone got on by himself and bought a ticket.

"Tucson," he told the driver, and handed over the money. He didn't even realize until after the word slipped out that he'd got it wrong. He knew for Rose's sake and his own that he should tell the driver to change the ticket, but something held his tongue. He wanted it so bad all of a

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sudden, like he was some kind of junkie. He just knew he had to go there, breathe the clean desert air. It would be all right, he told himself as the driver wrote out the ticket. He could keep ahold of Rose; they were family, after all. Just a little side trip to feed that emptiness inside him, and then they would head on up to Seattle. It would be fine.

The bus started up, and the other passengers didn't even look up as Rainbone lurched and shuffled his way to two empty seats by the window. Mose pressed his face to the glass and watched the Louisiana countryside go by for a while.

"What the hell did you go and do that for?" said Rose's voice beside him. Mose looked over at his granddaughter. She had her mother Sharon's pretty face, with its blue eyes like doll's eyes and a doll's soft pink mouth, but she dressed like a tramp — stained lace teddy, miniskirt hiked up her thighs, short blonde hair. She wore too much makeup, too, Rainbone thought, and it was smudgy around the eyes. Hard to believe she was only fifteen. Not so hard if you looked at her twice.

"Don't worry," said Rainbone. "I thought it out; we'll be O.K."

"I told you, Mose, I ain't worried," said Rose, her voice gone sulky and sullen. "It's just that you *said*, and I believe that people should stick by what they say."

"I ain't changing what I said," said Rainbone. "I'm just changing the order a little." Rose shrugged and sat back in her seat, kicking off her spike-heeled shoes.

"Well, if we ain't in a hurry," she said, "why don't I just wait until I'm good and ready to go to Seattle?"

"'Cause you can't," said Rainbone. He didn't want to talk about it anymore. He fingered a cigarette out of the crumpled pack in his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, and lit it.

"I'm dying for a smoke," she said.

"Help yourself," said Rainbone, offering the pack.

"Can't," said Rose.

"That's too bad," said Rainbone. "Kinda interesting, though." Rose wasn't distracted by that.

"I still don't see why we can take the time to go all the way to Tucson, and we can't just take a day or two more to see — I don't know — the Grand Canyon or something. Or New York City," she insisted.

Rainbone looked at her. He remembered Sharon saying things like that

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to him, but Rose's voice wasn't anything like Sharon's. It was full of bull, a brassy-blonde, ass-kicking voice that expected people to listen. The difference between people who shined and people who didn't. Sharon's voice disappeared in a quiet room, under the noise of traffic in the street. Where did Rose get it all?

"We ain't got enough money to go to New York City," Mose said. "Besides, the rainbone says I got to go to Tucson first." He lied for the rainbone sometimes. The truth was, he didn't know why he wanted so much to go to Tucson after all this time. The more he thought about it, the less sense he could reason out of it. But the less sense it made, the more he wanted to go and do it. He hated arguing with himself that way. Better not to think about things too much. If only Rose would just trust him, he could get in and out and no one the wiser.

He thought from the look on her face that she would argue more, but she didn't.

She just said, "Damned rainbone," like she couldn't argue with that, and gave it up to stare out the window. Rainbone looked, too. Drops of water spotted the glass. In the flossy blackness beyond, Rainbone saw a phantom glaring back at him — eyeless and hollow-cheeked. Just his own reflection. Rose didn't have one. The dead didn't get to keep much.

ROSE WAS four years old the first time Rainbone saw her. That would have made Sharon twenty-one. He hadn't intended on visiting them. It had just happened that he stopped in Seattle with young Eddy Buck, heading out to Vegas. Riding in Eddy's maroon '76 Maverick, they had just come off I-90 into town, and, cruising around looking for someplace that sold ribs, which Eddy had a hankering for, they passed a young woman pushing a stroller down the sidewalk, and Rainbone said:

"Looks like my kid."

He hadn't meant to say it aloud. Hadn't meant to say it at all. But Eddy looked at him and said:

"You got a kid, Mose?"

"Yeah," said Rainbone. "Lives here in Seattle, I think."

"No shit," said Eddy. "She cook?" Rainbone didn't know. He didn't even know if she still lived here, although he thought she probably did. He looked her up in the phone book, found her at an address on Queen Anne

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Hill. But he hesitated in the phone booth, dime in hand, before he called her. When he did dial the number, it rang and rang for a long time before Rainbone put the phone down.

"She ain't home," said Rainbone.

"You got to go see her. It'll be bad karma if we don't." Eddy was the only gambler Rainbone knew who talked about karma instead of luck. Talked about it like it piled up in little stacks on one side or the other, good or bad. From what Eddy said, you earned Karma like money. Good karma for good deeds, bad for bad. With good karma, you bought luck. But if you tried to buy luck with bad karma, you just bought more bad karma. Rainbone didn't believe in karma. He believed in luck, which he knew to be much slipperier. You couldn't buy luck or earn it. You couldn't even tell if it was good or bad until after it happened, and even then you couldn't be sure. Like with the rainbone. But like any gambler would, he trusted superstition for its own sake, and so they drove up and down the rollercoaster of Seattle until they came to a small white house at the top of a steep dead-end street.

There was a little girl playing with a green plastic horse in the front yard. The girl had Sharon's straight, fine blonde hair and blue eyes. They stopped the car and got out. As they came up the walk, the girl put down her toy and ran inside. A moment later Sharon came out with the girl balanced on her hip. She looked at the two men suspiciously as they came up the walk to the porch, and Mose didn't know if there was a moment there when she recognized him, because her expression never changed.

"Hi, Daddy," she said, and it sounded like all the times he'd heard it, stopping by to borrow a stake from Sharon's mother or spend a few hours in the sweet comfort of her bed.

"Hello, Sharon," said Mose. He didn't have anything else to say to her, nothing in his pockets for her. They just looked at each other for a long time there in the muggy Seattle sunshine. It was Eddy Buck who took over the talking then. Eddy Buck, handsome and smiling, shaking Sharon's hand and the kid's, too, who got them invited into the house for a beer and then dinner; talking like a snake charmer about their trip out, telling funny stories about dumb-ass jockeys and horny countergirls. Sharon seemed to like him a lot, and it made Mose feel old to be sitting, hunched over his pork chop and potatoes like a senile old rest-home inmate, listening to the young folks flirt and talk.

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He noticed little Rose watching him. She had not smiled at all, and Mose, ignorant of children, thought she was too young to talk. So he was more than surprised when she asked him, in a voice as ringing as rain on a desert flower:

"What's a rainbone?"

"Well now," said Eddy Buck, laughing. "Well now. I've always wondered that myself, Mose."

"It's just an old wives' tale, hon," said Sharon, too quick. Her eyes were on Mose, and he had to look away.

"Then why do they call you Rainbone?" Rose asked Mose directly. Mose didn't look to Sharon for permission, because he knew she wouldn't give it. She'd heard the story long ago, and believing it hadn't helped her none. Still, like he did every now and then, like the rainbone was pushing him, Mose felt he had to tell the story to someone who needed to hear it.

"Sometimes," said Mose, "when a baby is born during a rainstorm, that baby is born with a bone in its heart. And that bone is very magical. With that bone in your heart, you can hear ghosts."

"That's scary," said Rose.

"No. Ghosts ain't scary once you get used to them," said Mose. "They're usually just lost and lonely and want to go home. So that's what you do. You take them home."

"Stop it, Daddy," said Sharon. "Don't you lie to my child about no rainbone. A rainbone ain't nothing but an excuse to walk out on people who need you."

Rainbone didn't answer. He knew he should have waited until he could talk to Rose alone, without Sharon to interfere. She had so much anger in her over things said and done so many years ago. In a way, she was right. He hadn't done as good as he could for his family. But it was hard to explain. Sharon always wanted things to be black or white, and he didn't have it that way in his head. If it had been just him and Sharon alone, he'd have said something like that, or apologized, let the whole thing drop, but there was Rose to consider. Already he could see things in the child that needed to be explained to her. She had to know the rainbone was a real thing, and how she had to work it.

"It ain't right," Sharon went on, anger still hovering like a wasp in her voice. "Go on; tell her it's just a story. Tell her it ain't true."

"I won't lie to the child," said Mose. He looked from his plate to

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Sharon's face. It was like the face he remembered running up to him in the front yard, but different. Something awful had frozen there, the way you freeze a bad chicken so it doesn't smell. He knew he'd done that to her, and it made him angry. Little Rose, too, looking at him expectantly. They needed so much, people did. Not like the dead. The dead needed only one thing, a simple nudge in the right direction. Maybe they had needed more in their lives, but once they were dead, all of that seemed to run out of them. The dead were grateful for what they got, too. Maybe a little sad sometimes, but not torn up or burning like Sharon was now. More like me, thought Mose. The dead are a lot like me. He realized his attention had wandered, and that the bad things still hung in the air around the table.

"It ain't just a story, Sharon," Rainbone said, realizing as he said it that it was the wrong thing to say. Realizing from the look in Sharon's eye that she had been waiting for him to say just that thing for about a hundred years.

"Oh, it ain't?" said Sharon. "Then how come I ain't never seen no ghosts? Huh, Daddy? How come nobody else I know ain't never seen no ghosts? You ever see any, Eddy?" Eddy didn't answer, just gave something between a nod and a shrug.

"Your mother believed me," said Mose.

"She never did," said Sharon, "Never, Daddy. She loved you, that's all. She loved you and forgave you. That's all."

"That's something," said Rainbone. He stood up then, pushed his way away from the table.

"If you don't want me to stay, I'll go," he said. "You finish your dinner, Eddy. I'll be outside on the porch." He pushed his way carefully past Sharon and Rose to the back door and stepped through it. As the cool darkness took him up, he heard Eddy's low rumble trying to make peace. Sharon's voice came through the screen, too:

"He never will hear my side of it," she said to Eddy, and then: "Rose, you go off to bed now." Rainbone lit up his cigarette and took a deep drag.

Poor Sharon, he thought. He might have thought more, but there was something out there in the damp, rain-filled wind that hooked his heart. He spent awhile trying to fix onto it, but it faded into the distance and sadness before he could.

* * *

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THEY STAYED over that night anyway. Eddy came out and got him after a while.

"She's real sorry about the fight," said Eddy.

"I know," said Rainbone.

"And I'm sorry if I pushed you to come back here."

"Nah," said Rainbone. "You were right. I left it too long as it is." The two of them smoked outside for a few minutes more and then came in. Mose and Sharon made a kind of uneasy, apologetic peace and didn't mention the rainbone, either of them.

Sharon put sheet and blankets on the mildewy old couch for Mose and on the floor for Eddy. Mose just lay there in the dark, not really able to sleep, just lying still and half-thinking about the desert. He wasn't surprised when Eddy Buck got up quietly after a while and went into Sharon's bedroom, closing the door behind him. It didn't bother him. He hoped maybe Eddy Buck could give Sharon back some of the happiness she'd been robbed of.

A little while later, Rose came out of her room, a blanket wrapped around her, eyes big and full of moon. She hesitated in front of her mama's closed door. Rainbone heard her and, not wanting to scare her, said as quiet as he could:

"Your mama's sleeping." Rose turned away from the door and came to the couch to sit down beside him, swaying like some little ancient mummy. He sat up and put his arm around her.

"You have a nightmare?" he asked. In answer, she put her hand over her heart.

"It hurts sometimes," she said. Rainbone felt tears welling up around his eyes.

"Sometimes," he said. "Sometimes it hurts a lot. But other times, you hardly know it's there, unless it rains." And then, not for the first time, Mose hated the rainbone.

They left the next morning, and Eddy Buck never said anything much about the visit until one night in Vegas, watching Mose lose four hundred dollars in a crap game, he said:

"I always used to think the rainbone was a good-luck charm." And Rainbone answered: "Well, you can see it ain't that." And they both knew they weren't really talking about craps.

* * *

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The bus rocked and rolled along the road, and the rain streamed down like Hell emptying out. Rainbone realized he'd fallen asleep, and what had woken him were the whispers and the aching in his chest. Sometimes he wondered if his heart really was sick, if the rainbone wasn't pressing on things that shouldn't be pressed, and that his heart wouldn't just give out from it someday. Not today, he hoped. But the pain eased a little as he sat up. Rose was gone again, and that worried him a bit. Not just for her sake, but for his own. The whispers were louder now. Louder than the sloughing of the rain or the rhythmic slapping of windshield wipers. He was afraid to listen to the whispers tonight. Afraid they would distract him, take him away again. So many things he'd wanted or thought he wanted, left by the wayside while he followed some twitch of his heart. But not this time, he told himself. This time I'll follow my own hook. But he wasn't sure he had the strength to say no. He pressed his forehead against the cold glass of the window and tried to keep his mind closed to the lost and lonely voices of the dead.

Night passed, and the voices faded in and out of his dreams. Sometimes he would turn to see Rose beside him. Other times the rhythm of the road got hold of him, and he would be back in the Arizona desert, watching the parade of ghosts cross over from night into day. Sometimes Jenny was there. She stood at the edge of the scrub, corn-silk hair blowing in the wind. The wind carried her whispered words away. Then she turned and joined the parade and was lost to him in the empty night.

Rainbone woke and looked out the window. In the gray half-light of dawn, he could see lights and storefronts. The bus slowed and pulled up in front of a restaurant, and the driver called out, "Twenty-five minutes for breakfast."

"You hungry?" Rose asked. He wasn't but he wanted to get out into the air. He stretched sleep-tickled limbs and stood. Everyone else was doing the same, pulling down satchels, rearranging mussed clothes and tangled hair. They looked pleased and puzzled, like they'd passed through some awful trial during the night, and woke up a little surprised to find themselves still alive.

"Where are we?" Rainbone asked.

Oklahoma, I think," said Rose. They stepped out of the bus into muggy morning air and headed into Fay's Coffee Shop.

Fay had the air-conditioning turned up high, and Rainbone shivered as

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his bony hips sank into the thick red Naugahyde cushion of the booth. The waitress brought Rainbone a coffee right away, without him having to order it, and smiled at him as if he were still a young man and kind of cute, too. Rainbone liked that.

"You sure you won't eat something?" the waitress asked. Her name, in black letters on a bright pink badge, was Bonny.

"Maybe later," said Rainbone. He doubted it, but he wanted her to come back around. He wished suddenly that Rose weren't there, so he could flirt. But he knew that even if he were a free man, he was long past flirting. His heart didn't seem to hold room for that kind of thing anymore. Only room for ghosts and memories.

"I'll let you make up your mind," said Bonny, slipping a menu in front of him. Rose waited until she was gone.

"What we gonna do in Tucson, Rainbone?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," he answered.

"Well, how long we gonna be there?"

"I don't know that either," said Rainbone. He felt cross this morning, and answering Rose's questions made him look like a crazy old coot. Bonny wouldn't be smiling at him quite so friendly when she came around and heard him talking to the air.

"You don't know much, do you?" said Rose.

"Don't take no attitude with me," snapped Rainbone. "Don't matter what your mama said about the rainbone, you still need me to get you home."

"Well, who says I want to go home?" said Rose.

"Want don't have nothing to do with it. And besides," said Rainbone. "You'll want to when the time comes."

Rose shrugged and slouched back into her seat. She looked sulky and pouty and very young.

"I just wanted to see something of the world before I go," she said.

"I know you do," said Rainbone, softening a little. It was hard to remember sometimes that she was dead. It was always hard to remember that. Hard to believe that so solid a creature was a ghost, unseen and unfelt by those with whole hearts. Mose knew he could reach out and take hold of a small, cold hand or touch the yellow hair she was fidgeting with. But he knew, too, that Rose could turn in a direction exactly opposite from *here* and *now* and vanish from his sight to go walking along the crazy roads of the dead. What had it been like when she'd first turned

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in that unexpected direction?

She wasn't looking at him now, preoccupied with her own thoughts about all the things that were lost to her. He wished he could tell her about the other side, wished the rainbone had given him the power to see beyond into some wonderful, exciting new world where the dead would find something even better than they had left. But all he knew was that when they were gone, they were gone, and he couldn't bring himself to lie about that. Not to Rose.

"You must have seen some of the world," said Rainbone. "Sharon said you'd been gone a couple of months. Not the first time, either."

"I didn't see nothing but Washington state and a piece of Canada."

"Well, that's something," said Rainbone. "I ain't never been to Canada. What's it like?"

"Different," said Rose. "It smells different. The people talk funny. I don't know. How come you so interested in Canada?"

"I'm interested in you, is all. How come you ran away so much?"

"It wasn't no particular thing," said Rose. "Just everything. That house, the rain, Mama. I didn't get along at school. It felt like my whole life was just a dead tree on a dead-end street in the rain. Like what I saw out of my window was the whole world.

"But then, sometimes at night, alone in my room, when I'd be looking out the window at the dead, dark street, I'd get that twisty, achy feeling in my heart, and it was like the planet and all the stars were echoing down at me through the night sky. If it went on long enough, I'd go."

"That was the rainbone," said Mose, "Pulling at your heartstrings."

"I know," said Rose. "I met up with a ghost once. This guy I met along the waterfront — Snake, his name was — down near the aquarium. He said he'd cracked up his bike. 'Like a peach over sandpaper,' he said. I thought he was real cute, you know, so I just went for a walk with him, down along by the water. The wind was whipping up our hair, and we talked a bit. And all the time I felt that twisting in my heart, and I thought maybe it was love or something, but it didn't feel so good.

"He kept looking at me, saying, 'There's something real different about you, girl,' and hanging on to me. We made out some, then he asked me which way was east to Detroit. I showed him, and he walked that way, and then he was gone." She shrugged. "Took me awhile, but then I thought, Well, what's to be scared of? There's lots worse that are alive."

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"Was it the rainbone made you run away that last time?"

"It wasn't the rainbone made me run away, ever," said Rose. "It was just me wanting to go, and the rainbone giving me a reason, you know?

"Even now that it turned out so bad for me, even if I'd've known it was going to happen this way, I still would have gone." She laughed. "Wouldn't have got into that goddamn blue Camaro, though."

Rainbone looked up at Rose and saw that she was smiling. He realized it was the first time he'd seen her do that. She had a nice smile — a little wiseass, a little crooked — but a soft, sweet smile at heart.

"I think you learned a lot in your life," said Rainbone. "I wish I'd been around more."

Bonny, the waitress, came by again and poured more coffee into his cup.

"You sure you don't want something to eat?" she asked. Her smile was still bright and flirty. Maybe she just liked crazy old men. It made him feel good anyway.

"Think my bus is leaving," he said. "Maybe next time I'm passing through."

He left a five-dollar tip under his cup for the smile and paid the bill. Outside, morning was heating up the damp gray street. In front of the restaurant, the bus was still idling, one door half-open, like a drooping eye, to the warming daylight. Rainbone stepped up into it, found his seat. Rose sat down beside him.

"Sorry you didn't get better than you got," said Mose.

"Me, too," said Rose. "But what the hell." She shrugged and smiled that crooked smile again.

THE BUS rolled on through the day. The Oklahoma countryside stretched out on either side of the road like a thick green carpet, hot sun beating down, killing the air-conditioning. The sky was a clear, hot blue. Almost the desert sky, but there was still some water in it.

Rainbone felt the gentle ache in his heart, on and off, like a sore tooth. He missed it when it was gone, poked around for it until it came back. But when it did, it bothered him, made sitting uncomfortable. When the ache came back, so did the whispers, soft and sad like the muted conversations in a bus terminal, full of restless good-byes.

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He worried more about Rose. He'd once thought that the rainbone was some kind of calling from God. But the hand of God hadn't ever reached out to protect him or help him, and he'd stopped believing in that. The rainbone was just a part of nature and had nature's cold heart. It didn't care about who carried it or whom it called home. It didn't even have such a thing as care in it. It was just a cold, hard thing like a rock or the sky. Only people cared. Sometimes.

The bus stopped at the big terminal in Farmington for a couple of hours to gas up and change drivers. Rainbone would have stayed sitting in his seat until they left, but the driver made him get off. He wasn't hungry, so he just sat in the station smoking butts and watching the people. Rose said she wanted to look around, and he let her go. She'd most probably stay nearby, and he thought he needed a break from her company anyway.

He wondered idly if there was any quick action to be had, but he didn't know Oklahoma and didn't have Eddy Buck's quick ways of getting to know the climate of a town. He missed Eddy, wondered what had happened to him. For all Eddy's fast ways, Mose had always sensed a strain of settler in the man. He wondered if some woman had come along to tame the boy and make him happy. It could have been Sharon. That would have been good for both of them. For a while, anyway. No guarantees on a thing like that. A man could find the best woman in the world, and the two of them be happy for four, five years. Then the money would get tight, or they'd both get to remembering what they had given up for their happiness, putting the shine on memories that weren't half that good to live; and next thing you know, they'd be hating the very person who had saved them from their loneliness.

For a long time after Jenny was gone, Rainbone was sure they would have been different. Now he doubted it, but some little corner of his heart never gave up. Damn, he hated the way it rolled over and over in his mind. Once he started thinking about Jenny, she haunted him all over again.

And always the same doubts rose up to strangle her memory. Had she really loved him? He wanted hard to think she had. That made it all right somehow, if she had loved him back. But he could never be sure if that had been it.

They called the bus over the p.a., and Rainbone walked to the gate to meet Rose. She wasn't there, and the bus nearly filled up before she arrived.

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"Where you been?" asked Rainbone when he'd got them seats.

"All over the place," said Rose. "I just saw them bust a kid over by the gift shop."

"Sounds exciting," said Rainbone.

"It was, kind of," said Rose. "I felt bad for the kid, though. Didn't have the first kind of clue. Shoplifting souvenir spoons of New Mexico. Stupid dick."

The bus backed slowly out of the terminal, turned, and rolled on down the long-shadowed Farmington streets. They traveled in silence for a long while, Mose watching the low wood-frame houses flashing past, and then the longer stretches without houses. Rainbone's mind began to wander ahead to the high-country forests of ponderosa pine, and beyond that to saguaro rising out of dusty pink mesas dotted with creosote.

"Do you think Ma misses me?" Rose asked, pulling him from his daydream.

"'Course she does," Rainbone said.

"We wasn't talking much in those last days," said Rose.

"That don't mean nothing," said Rainbone.

"Maybe not," said Rose. "Maybe she thinks I don't miss her."

"Well, do you?" asked Mose.

"Yeah, I do," said Rose. "I missed her even when I was there."

"Some people are that way," said Rainbone.

"I never told her I loved her or anything," said Rose.

"I'm sure she knows," said Rainbone. Rose said nothing for a while, but she seemed uneasy with the answer. Rainbone could see that her thoughts were all over the place, worrying and wondering. He'd seen it before: a stage some of them went through of worrying about things left undone, questions left unanswered.

"About Tucson —," she began, but Rainbone cut her off.

"All right, Rose, it ain't just the rainbone. . . ."

"I know," she said. "I don't know how, but I know. It's personal, ain't it? Because of Jenny?"

"Where did you hear that name?" Rainbone demanded, his voice rising. The man in the seat across the aisle looked up at him suspiciously. He asked again, almost in a whisper.

"You talk about her all the time, Mose," said Rose. "In your sleep, every night since New Orleans."

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"Well, it ain't your business, is it?"

"I don't know, Mose," she said, sounding sorry and sad. "Sometimes when you say her name, I get this feeling; not like a rainbone feeling, just a weird emptiness. . . . It scares me, Mose."

Rainbone sighed. Everything he had tried to steer clear of in his life seemed to be reaching out long, tentacled arms to catch him here and now: Jenny, Sharon, Rose; all the tangled, broken pieces of his life. Maybe it *was* all connected. Maybe, cold and careless as it was, the rainbone was just like the rest of nature, all part of one pattern too big to see.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, resigned to the workings of nature's heartless web.

"Tell me about Jenny," said Rose.

"It's a long story," said Rainbone.

"I guess I got time," said Rose. Rainbone looked at her, tried on a smile.

"I met her in Arizona. . . ."

He'd been a young man then. Thinking maybe he was doing something important with this rainbone. Maybe not God's work, but just doing right, having a place in the world, doing something that meant something. He wasn't missing his family much. He never thought, in those days, that he'd really left them. He was only away, like salesmen were away at their jobs, and he always meant to come back. And when he was done with his work, he always did go back. It was just getting to be more time away and less time at home without him even realizing it.

And then there was Jenny.

Sleeping in his rental car by the side of the highway just three hours outside of Tucson, he was awakened by a knock at his window. He looked up, startled and dreamy, and saw a face looking back at him, a face made mysterious as the moon by sleep and the night's purple darkness.

Her voice through the glass was muted, and it took him a while to realize that this wasn't some desert spirit come creeping, but a woman with pale yellow hair asking him if he was all right.

He rolled down the window.

"Are you O.K.?" she asked again.

"Fine, fine," said Mose, confused. "Just sleeping, is all."

"Sorry if I woke you," said the woman. "I just came upon your car like this, and I didn't know. . . ."

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"I'm just fine," said Mose, and then, coming more awake, realizing that she was about to leave, and that something about her made him not want to lose her, he asked her to stay and talk.

She seemed uneasy with that at first, but Mose kept talking, making jokes, flirting like he never really was able. Anything so as not to lose her. After a while she lost her fear of him, and came and sat in the car. He put the dash light on and the radio, and Jenny — that was her name, Jenny Whitsock — came and sat down, and talked and blushed and flirted, too.

And then he thought, What's she doing out here in the middle of the night? And the possibilities scared him, so he didn't ask her. And then she told him of her own accord that she lived nearby in one of the little pueblos, and that she was sort of an artist and liked to walk in the desert at night.

"That can't be too safe," Mose had said.

"Exactly right," said Jenny.

"What do you mean, 'sort of' an artist?" he asked her.

"I ain't been painting long," she said, almost shyly. "It's a whole new life for me." And the conversation turned to her old life with a husband and no children, and his life with a wife and a daughter and gambling. Nothing about the rainbone, of course. Not the kind of thing you tell a woman you're falling in love with. Not till you're sure. And he wasn't quite sure.

Eventually he got cold and had to turn the car on to get some heat going, and he offered Jenny a lift to home or anywhere she wanted.

She took him home and offered to make him breakfast. Her house was small, messy. It smelled faintly of must and the desert and old turpentine. She said, go ahead; take a look — and while she banged in the kitchen, he wandered around, peering into dusty rooms, scaring spiders. In the room that was her studio, he noticed that most of the panes were broken, and dust and wind blew through the room.

There were canvases stacked up against the walls, lots of unfinished oils — not very good, he guessed, but he didn't know anything about art. They were of the desert, mostly. Scenes of sand and scrub and stratified rocks in pinks and reds.

There was one canvas sitting on the easel, just begun. A self-portrait, maybe. Just a faint outline of a woman's face in brown. He looked at it, trying to see Jenny's face in it, then touched it gingerly, The paint was long dried. It all was: the paint on the palette, the open tubes of paint on

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the table. Everything was dry and dusty. Rainbone turned away from it.

He made his way back through the house to the kitchen. Jenny was sitting at the table, looking at her hands. There was nothing frying on the stove or boiling in the kettle. Spiders scuttled in the piles of dust under the table.

"It's O.K.," said Rainbone, going to her. She didn't understand. She didn't know. But he knew. "I'll look after you."

"She was dead?" Rose asked, her voice soft with wonder.

"She was," said Mose. All the sadness of that time washed over him again like a river.

"And you didn't tell her," said Rose, "because you loved her."

"I thought it would be all right," said Mose. The way it sounded on the air was like he was telling someone besides Rose. Someone who couldn't hear. But even if she could, would it make a difference?

"Did she ever find out?" Rose asked.

"Yeah," said Mose. "She found out."

IT WASN'T a sudden thing. It was just that the strangeness of it all caught up with her after a while. Mose found out from the Mexicans living in the pueblo that the house had been long abandoned. The artist that used to live there? They didn't know. She had disappeared.

He moved in, bought food, cleaned the place up, fixed all the broken windows. It was summer. Sometimes it was just like normal. He loved Jenny with a feeling stronger than any he'd ever had before. They talked a lot. Mose had never been a talker in his life, but Jenny brought all his secrets up into the hot white light and made them shine. All but one, and that one he kept buried so deep that he all but forgot it himself.

They made love, too. On the big, musty wooden bed by the back window. Outside the window, the sun turned everything to brilliance and sharp-cut shadow. Dust would rise up off the desert as he rode her solid golden body into sweet agony.

But other times, it slipped away from them. Other times, after the blaze of sunset faded into cold purple night, Jenny would slip away from him and go walking alone in the desert.

That first night, he woke up to a twisting, squirming ache in his chest to find Jenny sitting on the edge of the bed, watching him. Her skin was cold, and she smelled of pepper and sage.

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"Where you been?" he asked, fear fluttering on bat wings around the rainbone. Jenny was slow to answer.

"Just walking," she said, but Rainbone knew there was more to it than that. Each time it happened, the rainbone in his chest twisted after her, and each time he fought it down. He'd never hated the rainbone before, had never known it as a curse. He tried everything not to let her go. He pleaded, telling her it scared him, that anything could happen to her out there, that if anything did, it would kill him. He ordered her not to go, roaring with anger in a vicious way he never imagined he had in him. He asked her, like it was just a little favor, to please wake him when she went, so he wouldn't worry. For a while she gave it up, slept or lay by his side while he lay sleeping, and didn't wander.

Things went well for a while, then one day he looked up from cooking himself dinner to find Jenny holding a spoon up to the light, studying her hand holding the spoon.

"What's the matter?" he asked her.

"There's something wrong with me," said Jenny. "I shouldn't be here."

"You're just a little stir-crazy, is all," said Rainbone. Jenny looked up at him. Maybe he'd answered too quickly; maybe something in his voice had given him away. Jenny didn't say anything more, but it was clear that something had changed.

The normal times grew less normal. A weird playacting feeling colored all their actions. Jenny still made love to Rainbone, but she talked less and less. He often found her staring at things: dust, a chair, her hand or foot, as if she didn't know what they were.

She began night walking again. Rainbone tried for a while to stop her, but when he brought it up, she pulled away from him, pulled into some deep, worried silence that scared him as much as the midnight walks, so he quit.

He followed her. Or tried to. It was easier on his heart to stay close to her, but no matter how carefully he kept his eye on her as she left the house, he always lost her. It hurt so badly. Losing her, feeling her drift away this way, wondering if she knew now and hated him. Still, he couldn't tell her. All he could do was watch her go.

Early one morning she came back before it was light, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Rainbone came suddenly awake, not realizing that he'd dozed off. He had gotten so used to her new quietness that he was

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almost ready to roll right back over and go to sleep again, but this time was different. Jenny's eyes were bright. All of her, in fact, seemed to shine with a hazy silver glow.

"What is it?" Rainbone whispered, his heart pounding like a fist in his chest.

"I saw them out there tonight," said Jenny, her voice breathless. "Like a parade of ghosts. Hundreds of them, shining silver in the moonlight. Hundreds of them, Mose. Walking. Just like me. Only, they were going somewhere." As she talked, the twisting in his chest grew worse, like the rainbone was hooked onto all of the hundreds of ghosts, all pulling in different directions. It crushed him so he could barely draw breath.

"I want to go, too, Mose," said Jenny. There was nothing in her voice like love, or sadness, or any kind of feeling at all. Mose was afraid even to touch her for fear his hand would pass through silver smoke, and she would vanish.

"You got to let me go, Mose," she said.

And he knew that it was the end. Something gave in his chest then. He felt it pouring down inside him in a warm rush, and he sobbed with relief.

"Tomorrow night," said Mose. "But I'm going with you."

Jenny was gone in the morning when he woke up, but he felt too weak to do anything about it.

He drank bourbon all day, and sat with the shotgun between his knees and cried a little. And after all that effort to keep her with him, he couldn't do it. He fell asleep in the chair. He woke to find Jenny standing at his side. She was still shining with that unearthly light. Rainbone dressed in warm clothes. Neither of them said a word — not about the shotgun, not about anything.

When it was time, Jenny left, and Mose followed. They walked a long way across the low, flat desert. Stars and moon stood still and bright in the sky above them. Finally they came to a ridge; they climbed up and looked down.

There, below them, just like Jenny had said, a parade of ghosts. Hundreds of them, as far as the eye could see in any direction. Walking. They all glowed with the same hazy silver light.

Jenny turned to look at him. There was a brightness in her face that he could not bear to look at. Her eyes were full of longing, but not for him. He

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closed his eyes, felt slow, hot tears leaking out.

"Let me go, Mose," she said. Her voice seemed to come from far away.

"I love you," he said.

"Then let me go." Eyes still closed, he nodded. He felt something soft and cold and airy touch his face.

When he opened his eyes again, she was halfway down the other side of the ridge. He watched her join the stream of silvery ghosts, and after a while he couldn't pick her out anymore.

"I bet you ain't never told anybody about Jenny," said Rose. "Not the whole story, anyway."

Mose shook his head. Tears ran down over his cheeks. He hadn't realized a thing so long buried could hurt the same as it had twenty-five years ago.

"I'm glad you told me," said Rose. She reached out and touched his face. Her hand was cold against his cheek, but it felt good; cradled in her hands, he slipped into a dark and dreamless sleep.

They pulled into the downtown Tucson terminal in late morning. Rainbone got off the bus, walked across the busy terminal, and bought himself a ticket to Seattle.

"I kind of wish you hadn't done that," said Rose.

"Why not?" asked Rainbone.

"I don't know. Ever since you told me about those ghosts in the desert, I've had a crazy feeling I wanted to try it out."

"Rose, you know you got to go home to get home," said Rainbone.

"I guess," said Rose. "I just hate to think that there ain't going to be anything more for me than that. Couldn't do any harm to try, could it? The rainbone brought us here. That must mean something."

"I just made that up," said Rainbone.

"You sure?" asked Rose. "Maybe it was the rainbone making you want to come out here so bad."

Rainbone tried to think of a reason not to, and couldn't find one.

"O.K.," he said. "The bus leaves for Seattle at 10:30 tonight. We can try, but if it don't work out the way you hope, we'll be on it. No arguing."

"No arguing," said Rose. "It's a deal."

As they walked out of the bus terminal, something caught Rainbone's

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eye in the window of the glass-and-chrome Tourist Information booth.

"I'll be right back," he told Rose, and ran into the booth. He came out a few dollars poorer, but feeling better than he had in years.

With their last two hundred dollars, they rented a junker at the edge of town and drove west. The desert sky seemed more washed out than Mose remembered it. It seemed right that way, though. The Tucson he knew had already been fading when he left it behind that many years ago.

"I doubt I'll be able to even find the place after all this time," he said.

"I'll find it," said Rose. "I know I will. I can feel it echoing on down to me. I know it's right." Her eyes were bright, and she leaned forward to stare hard out the windshield.

It was late afternoon before they found the pueblo where Mose had lived with Jenny. It had all but dried up and blown away. Not a single house stood. They got out of the car and walked among the dust-blown remnants of foundations. Rose peered out across the scrubby mesa with one hand shading her eyes.

"This way," she said, and set out across the furrowed plain. The late-afternoon sun rang down on them as they walked, up ridges and down, stopping every now and then so Mose could rest. Rose didn't need to rest, though. She paced while Mose smoked, or rubbed a cramping leg. Sometimes she'd go off on her own, racing up to the top of a ridge and coming back down asking Mose if that could be the one.

Mose was sure they were walking in circles. The sun went down in a wild blaze, burning the edges of the sky of red and orange, and he was ready to head back.

"Not yet," begged Rose. "We still got time. You can flag the bus from the highway. . . ." But as the darkness deepened, even Rose had to stop.

"I'm sorry," Rainbone said. It was a long time before Rose finally answered.

"But Rainbone, I can *feel* it," she said. She stamped her foot at the unfairness of it all and sat down on the edge of a rock. Rainbone came to sit beside her.

"I know it's hard," he said. Rose shrugged wordlessly and kicked at the dust. Rainbone swallowed and went on:

"I wanted to say . . . I wanted to tell you thanks . . . for listening to an old man talk. It did me more good than you know."

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"That's one thing I do know," said Rose. "When something hurts you, and you don't speak out against it, it poisons your mind against yourself. You start turning everything all against yourself. Look at Mama. She's just full of poison. Against herself, against the world. Against, you, Rainbone."

"I know that," said Rainbone.

"Yeah, but not because she ever told you. She just let you know in little ways."

"I didn't do much for her, either," said Rainbone. They sat quiet for a minute, listening to the rhythmic humming of the cicadas.

"Do you think you can find your way back to the road?" Rose asked.

Rainbone looked around. The moon was coming up silver and hazy in the east. To their left the ground sloped steeply upward. Behind them the ground fell away to narrow arroyos that branched in every direction. He felt it then, though it was so gentle, it might have been there all along. A tender twisting in his chest. He looked over at Rose. She glowed with the moon's tarnished haze. And she was smiling her crooked smile at him.

Together they climbed the ridge and looked down into the shallow canyon. They were there, glowing silver in the moonlight, an endless parade of ghosts.

"Rainbone," said Rose. "I got to go."

"I know you do," said Rainbone. He fingered the tiny, smooth crescent of petrified wood in his pocket.

"I guess I got to go, too." She smiled and reached out to hug him. Rainbone hesitated, then let his arms go around her, feeling the cool silvery lightness slip through his fingers. She was still solid enough underneath, though, and he held her tight.

"Tell her I'm sorry," Rose whispered into his ear. "Tell her I love her, and I'm sorry, and . . . I guess that's all I can say."

"I'll tell her," said Rainbone. He let go of her then, and she smiled her crooked smile at him and turned and walked, shining, down toward the silvery river below. He watched her go. At the edge of the flow, she turned and waved, and then she joined them and was gone.

After a while Rainbone turned, too, and took the long walk back to the road. The bus to Seattle would pass by anytime now. He made himself comfortable against a rock, lit up a cigarette, and closed his eyes. The Arizona desert faded away, and the wet, watercolor-blue sky of Seattle opened up inside his head.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THE RISE OF THE BLOOD-SUCKING ROMEO

IF ASKED to name a cultural indicator that this country is going to hell in a hand basket, different people would name different things: Madonna, the S & L scams, oat bran, carjacking, the vote against gay rights in Colorado, the Totally Hair Barbie, the Woody Allen-Mia Farrow scandal, Ice-T, the proliferation of Espresso stands, the beating of Rodney King (and/or the Simi Valley verdict, and/or the riots in South Central L.A.), the price of a pair of basketball sneakers, the fact that George Bush was elected president, the fact that George Bush wasn't re-elected president, the issuing of an Elvis postage stamp, or the shrinking size of the American candy bar.

I might add the growing popularity and evolving image of the vampire in film to that list. Once upon a time, a vampire was a monster who filled the viewer's heart with dread. Now he is a heroic figure, and a sex-symbol to boot. And I am none too pleased with his transformation. Sometimes, I am even mildly alarmed by it.

I don't like vampires. As cultural icons, they are truly disgusting. Not only would I not like to meet up with one in a dark castle, I do not even wish to see another movie about them. Vampires aren't just violent killers, they are total sociopaths. Their greatest pleasure — their only pleasure — comes from the pain of others. They enslave and murder, and can still get a good day's sleep.

And decadent? These guys and gals practically define the term. Decay is their natural element. Undead, yet not living, they are rotters who sleep in dirt-filled coffins, but who party by night in really swell (miraculously clean) outfits.

Vampires are robber-barons. Their wealth and power came at great price . . . to other people.

Is there something heroic in that? Not to me. I find the vampire hunter to be the hero of these stories. Which

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is why, of the current spate of blood-sucker movies, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is my favorite. Despite the fact that a few of the stars phoned in their performances and director Fran Rubel Kazui exhibited a woefully leaden hand with farce, *Buffy* was a film I genuinely enjoyed. This lightweight tale of a Valley Girl (played with winning energy and charm by Kristy Swanson) coming of age as a warrior, was about empowerment instead of surrender.

Which probably accounts, even more than the above-mentioned faults, for why it bombed at the box-office. It has reached the point where vampire tales are the ultimate romance novels — with particularly kinky sex. Female leads are no longer innocent victims, violated in their sleep (as in Browning's 1931 *Dracula*). Nor are they noble wives who seek to save others by sacrificing themselves (see either *Nosferatu*). These days, they are horny gals panting to have their jugular ripped, along with their bodice.

They want it. Are dying for it, in fact. They wear red see-through nighties to bed in the hopes of a visit from a demon. They offer their neck (and every other part of their anatomy) willingly. They want nothing more than to give up everything to their seducer. Their life's blood, their *life*, nothing is too much to sacrifice for the chance to be totally possessed by an abusive hunk.

Although this might sound like a male fantasy, they say that women are the most avid consumers of these sado-masochistic fabrications. And although I never thought I'd live to see the day when a woman would write a book (however ironic) entitled *How to Get a Date with a Vampire*, I can see how the marketing of vampires as dream-dates is made possible, given the modern woman's confusion about her life in a "post-feminist" world. So many responsibilities and choices. So much frustration and stress. The idea of giving (it) up, of being completely controlled by a "lover," can be made powerfully attractive.

Of course, I'm not trying to lay this tainted bloodlust culture directly at the feet of the women's movement. (On the contrary.) Even before the first issue of *Ms.*, in the sixties and early seventies, some vampires were already being portrayed as melancholy anti-heroes women should want to take care of. I remember how many of my baby boomer girlfriends had big crushes on Barnabas (Jonathan Frid) on *Dark Shadows*. For many of my generation, *Dark Shadows* was a campy, trashy delight. Still, I can't help but rue the day soap opera was grafted to the horror story. It only got worse

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from there.

In 1979, by which time feminism *had* made an impact on popular culture, a sterling example of what Susan Faludi has termed "backlash" was produced in the disguise of the most muddled re-telling of Bram Stoker's story. (As an example of the plot mishigas, consider that Mina and Lucy switch identities and the vampyric Mina turns out to be Van Helsing's daughter!) But support characters in John Badham's *Dracula* could be but a trifling matter when the title star was that hunka-hunk of biting love, Frank Langella.

In this elegantly somber (and ultimately dull) film, Dracula is a handsome and suave fellow who possesses a mesmerizing attractiveness for the ladies. Even a strong-willed (read: feminist) Lucy, played by Kate Nelligan, can't wait to be seduced (read: drained) by the mysterious, murderous stranger who moves in next door. Although Lucy is eventually saved, it is Laurence Olivier's Van Helsing who is killed. Dracula is fried by the sunlight, but the film implies that he might still have gotten away. (No doubt to allow for the possibility of sequels.)

Thankfully, there were no sequels to this particular Dracula. But now we have another. *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, and written by James V. Hart (*Hook*). Hart is making a living at reworking other people's material. And, as far as I can tell, he's none too good at it.

The director, the writer, and everyone else associated with the movie loved to say how Hart's play was "extremely faithful to the original Bram Stoker book." I know that it's been decades since I read the novel, but somehow "faithful" is not a word I'd use for this adaptation.

The horror and dread of Stoker's late Victorian gothic have been replaced with rivers of blood, numerous acts of sexual violence (including vampyric fellatio — ouch!), and a Romeo and Juliet love story. All handsomely mounted, of course. Mr. Coppola knows how to make a visually stunning movie, given a few bucks. And on this project, he was entrusted with $40 million.

The costumes by Eiko Ishioka are bizarre but beautiful, the makeup by Michele Burke and a band of magicians is some of the best I've ever seen. There are some breathtaking (and sometimes nauseating) special effects. And some lovely shots, like the one of a steam locomotive rolling across the frame over pages of Jonathan's travel diary, that do capture, briefly, the book and its time period.

Still, the folks that made this movie did not trust the power of

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Stoker's story. And their exploitive take on the original novel cannot be completely disguised by Coppola's operatic flourishes. Especially when so many members of the cast aren't even capable of credible accents and mannerisms.

I love Winona Ryder, but she was not quite up to the role of Mina. She was unable to portray Victorian repression, and she was little better at capturing sexual obsession. But she may, at least, comfort herself with the fact that she was ten times better than co-star Keanu Reeves. One assumes that Coppola and Columbia wanted a young American star to add a little box-office draw to their "classic" story. Reeves might have fit the bill, but he certainly didn't fit the movie.

His la-dee-dah impersonation of a nineteenth-century British professional was ludicrous. He didn't seem up-tight, he seemed petrified and embarrassed. Some of the fault must go to Hart for underwriting the role of Jonathan Harker. But Keanu didn't do his reputation as an actor, nor the reputation of the movie, any good by accepting the part.

Not every American was miscast, however. Songwriter/singer Tom Waits gives a marvelous over-the-top performance as the madman, Renfield. (Anyone who ever heard Waits perform his cover of Cole Porter's "It's All Right with Me" for the *Red, Hot & Blue* album knows that the part of Renfield was practically written for him.) But it is the British stars that make *Bram Stoker's Dracula* marginally worth viewing.

As always, Anthony Hopkins gives a brilliant turn to Dr. Van Helsing. Fighting vampires can unhinge a fellow a little. And Hopkins's Van Helsing is more eccentric and less professorial than Edward Van Sloan's kindly scientist, back in 1931. Since most Americans (who didn't see, but should have, *Howard's End*) last saw Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*, some may see similarities between Van Helsing and Dr. Hannibal Lecter. In reality, the two performances are shaded much differently, although both offer proof of the actor's great skill.

A generation younger, Gary Oldman gives a bravura performance as Dracula. Asked to play what amounts to five different characters (bat demon, wolf-man, and three ages of Vlad the Impaler/Dracula), Oldman captured each role with equal intensity. His ancient Count was especially fine. He's the only actor I've ever seen who could make me completely forget the layers of rubber and paint and fake hair and see the natural character hidden there.

Any actor would give his eye teeth

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to play a vampire with that much range. But that doesn't mean the audience will enjoy seeing that many representations of one character in a single movie. The many faces of this Dracula are indicative of Hart's showy screenplay and Coppola's style-defeats-substance approach to bringing *Dracula* to the screen.

One Dracula is enough, when he is genuinely scary. Old Bela Lugosi could do more with an eyebrow than Gary Oldman can do (through no fault of his own) with $100,000 of high-tech frippery. Split into so many pieces, Dracula's personality falls apart. And, personally, I was in no mood to try to put them all together again.

Especially since Hart and Coppola were obviously trying to sell me a bill of goods about how Dracula was actually a good guy with a broken heart, a fallen angel searching for his one true soulmate. That being the case, why would this lovelorn gentleman brutally rape — we're talking a wolf who screws a woman and rips apart her throat at the same time — the best friend of his beloved? Perhaps there could be a reason for this action. The filmmakers do not, however, provide us with one.

The heady mix of sex and violence needs no explanation or justification in Hollywood these days. And the vampire story provides the perfect mythic narrative framework to which the gents of tinseltown may readily attach repeated lush images of eroticized bloodletting.

Columbia's pricy production of *Dracula* is full of its own self-importance, Francis Coppola's involvement guarantees that fact. Yet it is no less exploitive than a low-budget schlocker like *The Blood of Dracula's Castle* (1967). It is only more pretentious, with spiffier special effects.

Give me a vampire film like Germany's *Jonathan* (1973) — one that portrays bloodsuckers for the fascists they are. Preserve us from high-toned trash like *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. It's the kind of movie that can leave you wondering what this world is coming to.

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James Lawson last appeared in our February, 1992, issue with another Montezuma Strip Story, "Heartwired." This time he returns with the inspiration for our cover, "Gagrito." His other Montezuma Strip story appears in Gardner Dozois sixth Best of the Year collection.

Gagrito

By James Lawson

I

AS THE SIFAKA SANG the final chorus of "White Christmas" in its creamy, ethereal tenor, it dropped to one knee and spread both thin white-furred arms wide, imploring applause. The delighted heavyset woman in the stylish beige thermosuit obliged. Acknowledging the compliment by placing its right arm across its powdery white chest and executing a deep, fluid bow, the half-meter-tall lemur concluded the performance by scampering back up to its blackwire cage and shutting the door behind it.

"It's breathing very hard," the woman observed uncertainly. Cuffs trimmed in brown diamond dust flashed as she gestured with perfectly manicured fingers. "Are you sure it's O.K.?" The light from the Gee-ee tenplus carbonide on her ring finger seemed to increase the illumination in the back of the store. Her round face bore the distinctive Ponce glow of recent collagen sculpting.

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The master of the establishment appraised the sifaka professionally. Squawks and screeches issued from the multitude of cages piled three and four deep against the storeroom walls, in which the imprisoned crawled, crept, flew, and squirmed in perpetual quest of appropriated freedoms. Some paced restlessly, their expressions motile friezes of ambulant desolation. Others snatched at fitful sleep. Despite the insistent respiratory hiss of the automatic deodorizers, the atmosphere in the back room was unavoidably thick with clashing musks.

"She's fine." The owner turned to his customer, smiling reassuringly. "Their bodies adapt quickly to the necessary contortions, and they are of course unaware of the existence of the installation itself."

"That's what I've heard." The woman appeared unconvinced, but willing to be.

The merchant reached up to tap on the blackwire. The black-and-white inhabitant of the cage was too tired to flinch. "You never see the stim wires, because they're laid right on top of the muscles. Loading access for the neuromotor and the voice box is on the right shoulder, just to the sides of the spine. There's a small bump, but the animal's fur hides it completely. First-class installation, brand-new animorph components. You won't find better."

"It's not the tech that concerns me." The woman eyed the sifaka hungrily. "I thought all lemurs were on the Endangered Species List?"

"Only certain species, and then only in parts of Namerica," the store owner assured her. "Sifakas breed well in captivity. This one's surplus stock from a Sinaloa zoo. Comes with a notarized license, all registered and legal. You can take him home without worrying."

The woman still hesitated. "I don't know. . . ."

The advocate smiled encouragingly. "'White Christmas' is just one of a dozen traditional favorites included in the holiday song pak, and there are twenty song paks for this model available on the open market. I just happen to have the holiday pak in her now. You saw some of the tricks she can do. There's a gymnastics pak — sifakas are very agile — and a kidkin pak, and a household-assistant pak. They have opposable thumbs, you know. Very handy if you do a lot of cooking and take the kitchenaid option. You can't get that with a puppy."

"I know; but puppies are legal."

"I'll show you the certificate of release from the zoo, if you want. Of

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course," he added, pursing his lips and turning away with studied indifference, "If you're not interested. . . ."

"I didn't say that," she said hastily. She approached the cage, which rested atop a much larger enclosure containing a quiescent golden teju. The sifaka gazed mournfully down at her out of vast, vacant eyes.

"He's so pretty. And so much more . . . unique than a puppy."

As it was clearly no longer necessary to exert any pressure, the owner relaxed. All that remained were the formalities. "I understand you're from New York?" The woman nodded. "Imagine the reaction of visitors to your home. None of them will have anything like this."

"Dr. Fonsecu's wife has a black-cockaded cockatoo that sings Italian opera while playing the piano, but I think a primate is just so much more . . . versatile."

"Very right." He reached up to unlatch the sifaka's cage. The lemur did not try to run. It had done that once before, and remembered.

A small electronic pad reposed in the owner's left hand. "Do you have a notex?" His customer nodded. "I'll transfer the instruction book and command controls." He indicated the cage. "You can manipulate her manually or via the preprogrammed sequences. The holiday song pak comes with the purchase."

Having made up her mind, the woman gave way fully to her desires. "I'll take all the accessories you have. The kitchen pak, all the song paks; everything."

"That's going to be expensive," the store owner warned her, quietly gleeful.

"It's already expensive. Let me worry about that."

"As you like. I suppose you'll be wanting a travel cage for her, too?"

She nodded eagerly. "Something subdued and tasteful. My husband and I are at the Cantana in Tucson. I drove over this morning. Had a hard time locating your shop."

"A common complaint, but my customers always manage to find me. Being situated in an industrial district sometimes has its disadvantages." A noise from the front of the shop made him frown. In expectation of his special referral, he'd closed early, and had no further appointments scheduled for that evening. "Excuse me just a minute."

He was halfway to the door that separated the front of the shop from the back, when it burst inward, sending him stumbling backward in surprise.

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The woman blinked in confusion.

"Gluey, Twotrick; get the cages."

At first the startled owner thought a woman had spoken, but quickly saw that it was only a Spanglo girl. Not more than sixteen, if that. She was skinny and blonde, with eyes from which the pale blue had been drained as if by a siphon. Her skin was the color of fossil ivory, scorched in places by brown cancers that were the inevitable result of living too long beneath the merciless Southwest sun. Bony hips were all that punctuated the nervous angularity of her body.

Of much more interest was the peculiar suit she wore, gray-black like sooty steel. Including gloves, boots, and hood, it covered every part of her body except her face. A multitude of silvery wires had been woven into and were integral with the dark fabric. Gleaming diode-spotted components were strapped to her limbs, giving her the appearance of an ambulatory entertainment center. A thin black vorec curled from the edge of the hood toward her narrow lips, bobbing like a questing worm when she moved.

Of the two boys who accompanied her, one was slightly younger, the other distinctly older. Twotrick was tall, muscular, and black, with a distorted prognathous jaw that gave him the aspect of a dead Pharaoh, and a rumbling nose that had suffered through too many street fights. The much smaller Gluey was stringy-haired and afflicted with the cherubic visage of a feral baby. Tiny flecks of black floated in the whites of his eyes like pepper on fried eggs, sure sign of a longtime desdu user. He blinked incessantly despite the subdued lighting.

The owner's blood pressure soared as the boys began opening the cages. Initially hesitant, the animals were soon pouring out. They frolicked about the storeroom, screeching and cawing, pounding on their former enclosures, generating a din suggestive of a chorus of the recently damned.

"Gluey, get the back door." The girl's voice was unexpectedly resonant. Her stunted cohort sniffed as he ran to key the egress. As the door slid aside, it revealed the interior of a large van that had been backed up to the rear of the store. Little of the access alley in which it was parked was visible. The boy's taller companion began shooing freed animals into the waiting vehicle.

The owner took a step toward him. His gun was latched under the counter, out front. "Hey, you can't do that!"

The youth whipped something short and nasty out of his back pocket,

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snapped his wrist. The ten-centimeter-long cylinder promptly quadrupled in length. It looked like a teacher's pointer, except for the slide trigger set in the base. "Fade, animonger."

The merchant swallowed, correctly assuming that the power injector was loaded with something other than copasceptic. He was reduced to looking on as dogs, cats, birds, and exotics were alternately cajoled and guided into the truck.

"Some of them need special diets, special care. They'll die on you," he muttered accusingly. "You can't expect them to survive in the Strip."

"We'll do the best we can," the girl responded matter-of-factly. "At least they won't have to spend the rest of their lives dancing and performing to the stim of some goddamn program for some rich kid's amusement. Some of 'em will make it. There are people who'll help and won't ask questions." Her pale eyes flashed. "You've been mongering danspecs."

"What do you care?" Helplessly, he watched his priceless inventory fly, run, crawl to freedom. "Damn loco *niños*!"

"*Seguro miro*." The one called Gluey giggled as he tweaked the lock on a black macaque's cage with a pair of snips. The primate hesitated, then swung free. Twotrick urged him toward the van. Night heat poured into the storeroom, Strip-fierce and unrelenting.

"Little bastards. You'll pay. I have friends, too. You'll pay."

The girl ignored him as she opened the sifaka's cage and murmured encouragingly. "It's O.K. Come on out. C'mon." She extended a hand. The lemur eyed her gravely, then climbed out onto the perch of her arm.

"As we came in, I heard something singing. This one?"

The shop owner sniffed derisively. "It's sold."

"Not anymore." The girl turned to the terrified older woman. "You don't want her anymore, do you?"

"N-no. Look, I don't know what's going on here. I just want to leave. Please let me leave. My husband's waiting for me back at the resort. He'll be worried. I told him I was going shopping, but it's getting late." She edged toward the doorway that led to the front of the shop, away from the rear entrance that was filled with escaping animals. "Just let me go."

Pale blue eyes considered as the girl addressed the lemur. "What do you think, little preman? Should we let her go?"

The sifaka had been preening its long black-striped tail. Now it stopped to stare at the woman. "Kill the bitch," it said distinctly in its liquid tenor.

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The matron's eyes widened. "No, it can't; you can't."

"Tear out her womb. No, let me." The lemur leaped, landing gracefully on the now-empty cage nearest the woman. She screamed and bolted.

"Stop; it's all right!" the shop owner shouted. "Can't you see the girl's controlling it?" But his terrified visitor didn't hear. She stumbled over a pile of bagged pet food and fell to the ground. The sifaka landed on the woman's back, clawing at her expensive clothes. On hands and knees, the woman scrabbled toward the doorway. Behind her, Gluey was cracking up, his machinegunlike laugh only half-natural. The girl in the suit wasn't smiling.

Bloody gouges appeared in the matron's back as the lemur's claws dug deep. She moaned as she staggered to her feet and clawed weakly at the door latch. The girl whispered something into the vorec that hovered at her lips, and the sifaka released its grip on the woman's shoulders, pivoting to race toward the van on all fours.

Sobbing, the former customer stumbled through the portal. An instant later the merchant darted after her, thinking of the gun secured to the underside of his front counter. Twotrick uttered an oath in Spanglish, and Gluey's maniacal giggling ceased.

The girl reacted, the sensors proximate to her arms and legs, hips and head automatically transmitting her movements to the nearest magified animal. The reticulated python whipped out and caught the shop owner around the legs, bringing him crashing to the floor in an explosion of supplies and empty cages. The girl's lips moved.

"Too late, *ladrón*." The python's voice box had to work hard to generate an intelligible wheeze. "You sell no more magic animals."

The merchant flopped wildly as the python threw a coil as thick as a man's arm around his neck. It was an unnatural movement for the big snake. Ordinarily, it would slip its coils around its prey's chest, patiently constricting as the quarry inhaled, suffocating it. But for the moment, its muscles functioned in obedience to the girl's movements.

"Please!" Suddenly the shop owner was pleading, no longer threatening, but frightened, really scared now. "You've already ruined me. Enough!"

"No," the girl murmured tightly. "No, not enough. Not this time. Not anymore, enough." Slowly, she brought her arms across her chest. As she did so, the snake's coil, taut as steel cable, tightened convulsively around the man's neck. He screamed. But it was late, and dark, and the buildings

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on the other side of the alley were silent and deserted.

Gluey giggled when the man's spine popped.

The girl turned away and rubbed at her eyes, too-tired orbs that seemed to belong to anyone but a sixteen-year-old.

"Let's finish it," she muttered determinedly. Twotrick gazed solemnly back at her and nodded.

Too much stimmed dancing had damaged the young orangutan's leg. It took two of them to help it out of its cage and into the waiting van. City noises, Strip sounds drifted into the empty alley. The merchant lay on his side, eyes gazing blankly at the ceiling of his storeroom, his head screwed round at an impossible angle. At the best speed it could manage, the python slithered off him and headed toward the alley.

II

WE'VE CHECKED with the San Juana, Nogales, and Yumarado district SPCAs and the big regional animal-rights activist groups. All of 'em deny any knowledge. As usual, nobody knows nothing. But some outfit in San Luis calling itself the Protectors of the Wild got a whole truckload of critters dumped on them the morning after the homicide. Half of 'em were danspecs, endangered species, and nearly all had been magified. Enough violations to seq the guy for twenty years if he hadn't already been nulled."

"You think they're telling the truth?" Cardenas gazed out the window.

The lieutenant shrugged. "Fanatic animal freaks; who knows? Usually they're about as cooperative as last week's hash. But we don't have a thing on any of them, and the Yumarado office can hardly drag people in on suspicion. Some of them say that they're willing to answer questions. So Yumarado asked for my best questioner. That's you, Angel."

Cardenas didn't turn away from the view. Focus of law enforcement on the Montezuma Strip between East San Juana and Elpaso Juarez, the Nogales Police Complex leaned west toward the distant green monument of Tumacacori. North to Phoenix, south to Guyamas, east and west to the sea, the *maquiladora* plants of the Strip injested raw materials and basic components from around the world and, through application of massive quantities of skill and labor, transformed them into consumer goods, unwanted excess heat, and enough nighttime light to drown out the desert stars.

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Millions of people worked in the Strip's vast multinat design and assembly facilities: mask sculptors, compilers, fabrication artists, whitecoats from all over Namerica, each hoping to rise through the ranks, each aspiring to a codo in Phoenix or Guyamas, San Juana or Felipe. In the rush to achieve, to succeed, to survive, there was little time left to devote to abstract moral crusades. Those remained the province of the truly idle, the entertainers and industrialists of LaLa or the Big CMC.

To sate their consciences, they gave money, and time when it was convenient and efficacious. Then they hurried back to their sumptuous homes and careers, content that they'd done their humanitarian duty until the next TV headlines made them uneasy afresh, and they sensed it was time for their next egalitarian fix. Celebrities shot up on moral rectitude.

The true animal-rights activists were more dedicated. For them, convictions were more than a hobby. They fought, and marched, and struggled to put across their philosophy.

But to the best of Cardenas's knowledge, they didn't murder those they disagreed with. Until, possibly, now.

"What about the woman who was in the store?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "She was pretty shook-up. Managed to get a quick statement out of her before her husband hustled her out of Tucson. He's some fancy doctor back East. You saw the transcript. Three crazy kids, animals that went gonzo, one that attacked her. Not much detail on the kids. One black, one white, one Spanglo. Since when have ninlocos started taking an interest in animal rights?" He shook his head. "Doesn't make any sense. There's nothing in it for them. Too bad she didn't witness the actual homicide. From her description, none of the intruders was big enough to have killed the owner, but that doesn't make him any less dead. Maybe there was a fourth party she didn't see. Given her state of mind at the time, it's not an unreasonable assumption."

Cardenas nodded. The coronor's pictures made it look as if the shop owner had been strangled with an anchor chain.

III

HE HOPPED an express induction shuttle west, the crowded high-speed public transport following the approximate line of the old U.S.-Mexican border. The plastic car smelled of disinfectant and spanglish fast food. The local from Yumarado Central dropped

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him off two blocks from the station, where a bored investigator went over the details of the murder with him one more time, and finished by pumping the official line into his notex. The crunch included the address of every local organization with an interest in animal rights and endangered species.

He checked out the Friends of the Earth office first, then the Nature Conservancy people, then the Yumarado arcomplex SPCA. No one he talked to expressed much sympathy for the dead pet-store owner. All were violently opposed to the semilegal concept of magimals, whether the involved was a representative of a rare species or just a common mutt. They thought the concept barbaric. Cardenas didn't argue with them; he just moved on.

He'd saved the offices of the Protectors of the Wild for last, since it was on their doorstep that the animals liberated from the pet shop had been deposited. The young man who agreed to talk to him wore the beatific expression of the self-anointed. His office was cantilevered out over the lower Colorado Canal. As Cardenas took a seat, an oceangoing freighter went plugging past, headed downriver on its way back to the Golfo de California. The docks where it had dropped its cargo lay farther upstream. In this part of the arcomplex, the canal was lined with offices and expensive codos.

"Nice place," Cardenas commented, taking in the posters of big-eyed animals and lush rain forest that filled the walls.

"We're fortunate to have a sponsorial legacy," the young man told him. "We've already told the local police everything we know."

Cardenas smiled. He was a small man, deceptively muscular. His drooping dark mustache, flecked with gray, and his deep-set eyes gave him the appearance of a commiserating basset hound. Behind that harlequin visage lurked skill, talent, and a glittering intelligence.

"I know. I don't mean to take much of your time, but just to satisfy the people in Nogales, tell me. Please." He smiled hopefully.

The younger man sighed. It was midsummer, and he wore a white thermosensitive cool suit. It was 10:00 A.M., and already the temperature outside had risen to forty-seven Celsius, on its way to a predicted forty-nine.

"Nothing much to say. The lady who opens for us every morning found one of our transit enclosures filled with new animals, each group neatly

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separated into compatible cages. The note pinned on the gate just said, 'Refugees: take care of them.' That's what we've been doing."

"I understand most of them have already been dispersed?"

The man nodded, looking pleased, as though he expected Cardenas to challenge him. "Police wanted them impounded as evidence, but we got an animal habeas corpus fast. Most of them are already at or on their way to appropriate parks or reserves, where they belong. The domestics are being given away as fast as we can do the operations and find homes for them. There are a lot of people who still like unmagified pets. Birds that act like birds instead of stage performers. Cats that don't do housework."

"For what it's worth," Cardenas told him, "I don't believe in the modifications either. The best friend I ever had was a Seeing Eye dog. Nobody had to program him to look out for me."

It took some of the edge off his host's attitude. "I didn't know. We've fought for prohibiting legislation ever since the technique was introduced, but it's a new area of law, and getting animal rights codified is a difficult slog. Too many people haven't made up their minds yet. It's tough when your kid gets a dog for Christmas, and the neighbor's boy gets a puppy that can fetch water from the bathroom, turn the pages of a book, and sing you to sleep while saying 'I'm your best friend.' It's unnatural and more than a little sick, but it sells." He made a face. "Novelty always sells."

"It hasn't been proved that the magified animal suffers," Cardenas felt compelled to point out.

"Not if it's treated properly, no. Forget for a moment that it begs the question of animal dignity and human responsibility. We've got files of horror stories: kids overworking their magimals, exhausting them to death. Animals used for illegal purposes. Sloppy installation and maintenance work. Pornography. You name it — I can show it to you."

"We have our own files," Cardenas reminded the man.

"But not our sources. People will come to us who don't want to get involved with the *federales*. Let me show you just one example." He pulled a vorec from his pocket and addressed it quietly. The wallscreen to his left came to life.

Cardenas was interested. He'd never seen a magified alligator before.

The big reptile had been laid open along the back, the thick skin peeled aside to expose the deep red musculature beneath.

As his host spoke, the image zoomed in close to show a tiny controller

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unit that had been installed atop the gator's spine. Microscopic metallic filaments extended from the unit to the gator's legs, tail, and skull. The program chip had been extracted and lay atop the control unit. It was the size of a pinhead. Nearby lay a tiny plastic square from whose slick black surface four miniature joysticks protruded. Using them the manipulator could electrically stimulate the animal's muscles to expand and contract according to carefully prepared programs, making it walk, run, jump, or execute any number of complex muscular activities, natural or anthropomorphized. Or the control pad could be set aside in favor of automatic programs.

"The owner had the poor creature fitted with an attack chip," the man explained. "Using the controller, the owner could make the gator stand on its hind legs and tail and fight off burglars. When the owner wasn't around, the gator patrolled his place of business according to an exhaustive protection sequence. The talk portion of the chip supplied the animal's voice box with some pretty intimidating language."

"I still marvel at how they make them speak," Cardenas murmured.

The man smiled grimly as the wallscreen blanked. "If you want your magimal to talk, you have to pay for a properly installed artificial larynx. In every higher creature except man, the larynx is elevated so the animal can breathe and drink at the same time. That's why unmodified apes and dogs can't say so much as 'hello.' Neither can human babies under three months of age, until their own voice boxes begin to descend into the throat. But when you graft in a second, lowered larynx, animals can form words just as effectively as the rest of us.

"Set the control chip to stimulate the second larynx according to preprogrammed patterns the same way the chip stimulates specific muscles elsewhere in the body, and you've got an animal that can 'talk.' Except that it isn't talking, any more than the football-playing grizzlies you've seen on TV are playing football. It's all being run by programs or humans manipulating controllers.

"As much as we might've disliked this guy and what he was doing, we didn't have anything to do with what happened to him. Even if the local *federales* don't believe us."

"I believe you," Cardenas told him. "I'll see to it that you're not bothered anymore." He started to rise.

The young man was too surprised to be thankful. "That's it? You just ask

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me a few questions, and you're sure?"

Cardenas turned. "*Sí.*"

His host's eyes widened slightly. "You're an intuit, aren't you?" Cardenas said nothing, and the man nodded to himself. "Yeah, no wonder you're sure. You read my mind."

The sergeant sighed. "An intuit cannot read minds. We arrive at our decisions based on careful consideration of linguistic peculiarities, semantic fluctuations, subtle movements of eyes and limbs. Experience gives you a feel for when people are telling the truth and when they're lying or trying to hide something. That's all. Because of an incident of violence, I suffered sightlessness for many years, until the biosurges learned how to transplant optic nerves and could give me new eyes. During that time my condition forced me to sharpen my skills." He smiled again.

"So you see, I know a lot about modifying operations." He reached the door.

"How're you going to find the people who did this? The *federale* I talked to said you were looking for a bunch of ninlocos. There are a thousand ninloco gangs in the Strip, plus solos. At least a hundred of them claim members in the Yumarado district."

"I know," said Cardenas simply. "You learn by asking questions. That's what I came here to do, and I've just started." The door closed quietly behind him.

IV

THE ARENA stank of death and chicken shit, human perspiration and dried blood. On opposite sides of the pit, miniature grandstands had been cobbled together out of discarded plastic and extruded carbon composites. The pit itself was carpeted with sawdust. In corners and beneath the stands, dried blood mixed with the scrap pulp and shreddings to form irregular brown clods. Lightstrips glued to the low, flat ceiling dimly illuminated the arena, while a couple of mobile cold spots suspended from the roof were aimed at the pit.

From the men and women in the grandstands arose an enthusiastic babble in a multiplicity of languages, but the predominant means of communication was spanglish, the patois of the Strip. Lithe, mean-faced

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men circulated among them, taking down bets on battered vorecs, offering false encouragement to the bettors. They could afford to be accommodating. No matter which individuals won, the house always got its percentage.

Higher up, off to one side, several comfortable chairs rested on a suspension platform. Those seated behind the single lexan railing could look down on both the pit and the crowd. El Banquero spread out in his chair, his attention concentrated on the steady stream of information that filled his earplug. Occasionally he whispered into the jeweled vorec trapped between his thick fingers like a metal cigar. On one finger gleamed a fine gold ring dominated by a single ruby the size of his thumbnail. It was, naturally, blood-red.

Behind him stood a beautifully tanned Anglo not quite as big as the average family vehicle. In the weak light, he wore dark glasses with infrared boosters. His eyes roved restlessly, professionally, over the milling crowd. A woman not more than twenty, who looked not less than forty, sat sideways in Banquero's lap. His free hand probed mechanically between her thighs, up under the short neofabric skirt. She looked unutterably bored.

Cheers reverberated throughout the arena as the spots were turned on, bathing the pit in their harsh, inescapable glare. Two men emerged from opposite doorways behind the grandstands. One of the men was lean, old, hard; a permanent denizen of the Strip, from whom all sympathy and compassion had long since been wrung out as thoroughly as the moisture from a wet rag. The other handler was younger, with a bald forehead that gleamed fleshily beneath the lights. Shouts, suggestions, and ribald comments from the crowd buffeted them as they took up positions opposite one another.

They spoke soothingly and continuously to the roosters they carried as they set them down gently on the sawdust floor. The birds were petted, caressed, reassured. Each wore a small blindfold over its eyes; and on each leg and wingtip, a razor-sharp spur fashioned from discarded surgical scalpels.

As the noise of the crowd rose to fever pitch, the men removed the birds' blindfolds. The two fighting cocks saw one another even as their handlers tossed them into the center of the pit. Banquero leaned forward slightly.

Slowly, methodically, the birds began to circle one other, heads thrust

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forward, neck feathers erected and bristling as they tried to stare each other down. One bird, resplendent in iridescent black-and-green plumage, was slightly larger than its opponent, whose feathers were tinted a more familiar but no less spectacular yellow and brown. The crowd howled, bellowed, gesticulated obscenely. Vorecs were waved, bets doubled and tripled.

The two handlers squatted on their haunches, each holding a small controller box as they gazed at the clock that hung on the far wall. At the agreed-upon time, the controllers were activated. A shudder seemed to pass through each bird. They straightened abruptly, assuming unnaturally erect postures without sacrificing any of their natal alertness.

The yellow-brown bird suddenly leaped, twisting its body to the left and kicking out with its right leg. The opposing handler's fingers moved on his control sticks, and his own bird ducked, blocking upward with a wing to effectively turn the blow aside. The crowd roared.

The green-black rooster threw a right jab, then a left as its opponent backpedaled. Spurs flashed, but both blows missed. The two roosters, their movements regulated by the karateka chips embedded in their necks and in the controllers of their handlers, continued to throw kicks and punches and blocks as efficiently as any highly trained humans facing each other across a dojo mat.

The yellow-brown was smaller but slightly quicker. A jumping-spinning back kick finally caught the larger bird a bit slow to react, and an ankle spur sliced through its chest, sending feathers and fluid flying. The crowd roared: first blood. Stunned, the green-black retreated, defending itself as its handler tried to assess the extent of the damage.

The green-black was very close to him, when it suddenly whirled, jumped, and kicked out smartly with both legs.

A different sort of scream rose from the crowd as the handler fell backward, clutching at his ruined eyes. An instant later the other handler, trying to run to his opponent's aid, was brought down by his own bird, which struck with both a leg and wingtip at the man's ankle, severing the Achilles tendon and sending him screeching into the sawdust.

The noise volume in the arena previously was nothing compared to the panicky tumult that now shook the walls as the crowd surged wildly toward the single exit. They jammed up against the narrow portal, men and women alike finding themselves crushed against the walls or trampled

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underfoot by fellow frenzied aficionados, those in back moaning or shrieking as they tried to protect themselves from the fluttering, fast-moving cocks, who utilized the hysteria as a stage, slicing randomly at flailing hands, arms, and exposed backs.

High up, a frowning, disturbed Banquero rose and started for his office, wondering at the cause of the chaos. The woman who had been attending to him clung to his arm, seeking protection. Banquero grunted once, and his hulking shadow ripped the girl free, tossing her over the rail with casual indifference. She stopped screaming when she hit the ground, bounced once, and lay still.

'Banquero had his hand on the office door, when something snicked across the back of his wrist, causing him to jerk it back. The four-centimeter-long gash oozed blood as he grabbed at it. Cursing, he gazed in furious bemusement at the yellow-and-brown rooster that perched on the railing, staring back at him.

His bodyguard drew a large-caliber gun from a shirt holster and was aiming it at the bird, when a fluttering mass of feathers landed on his head. Spurs dug in. Howling, he reached up with both hands to dislodge the green-black. Avoiding the powerful, clutching fingers, the fighting cock struck out as it dropped, kicking hard enough for the surgical steel on its ankles to shatter the dark lenses and drive fragments of sharp carbonite into the hulk's eyes. He screamed and stumbled backward. The railing was insufficient to support his great weight, and he fell, still clawing at his face, to land not far from the motionless whore who by dint of his callousness had preceded him floorward.

Banquero reached for the door again, and again the yellow-brown struck at his hand, this time gouging deep enough to lay open the tendons on the back of the man's wrist. Hissing with pain and fury, he fumbled inside his shirt for the tiny but lethal pistol that reposed there.

Having finished with the bodyguard, the green-black flew straight at Banquero and began kicking. The arena master screamed like a woman, dropping to his knees while flailing feebly at the attacking bird. The other rooster left its perch to join in, the two birds digging and clawing and scratching until there was simply nothing left of Banquero's face, nothing at all. Then they fluttered over the broken railing, trailing blood from their feet and wingtips.

They landed on the narrow shoulders of a young woman clad in a gray jumpsuit. As the rest of the crowd fought to escape the arena, she hurried

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toward a hole that had been cut in the base of the far wall. Exhausted but otherwise unhurt, the two rumpled birds obediently hopped off her shoulders to precede her through the gap.

V

AS CARDENAS questioned selected representatives of the various ninloco gangs that drifted in and out of the Yumarado district, he found himself watering a ripe field of negatives. No one knew anything. Nil, nix, nada; nothing. The interests of the gang members he talked to were wholly orthodox — which was to say, they were obsessed with sex, drugs, and music, to the exclusion of everything else. Causes, moral or otherwise, concerned them not at all. What interest they did express in magimals extended only to those that could be stolen and resold.

There was some talk of rare species being smuggled northward for sale from the CenAm states and the Yucatán, but, to the best of the gangs' knowledge, this was traditional animal smuggling, nothing to do with magifying.

He spent a week questioning, interviewing, following tips, learning nothing. The heat was horrible, and he tried to confine as much of his traveling as possible to late night.

The first morning of his second week in Yumarado found a message waiting on his desk when he came to work. Though elegantly phrased, it was more in the nature of a command than a request. Something about the signature at the bottom seemed vaguely familiar. He ran it through research, and was not surprised when a response was rapidly forthcoming.

His Yumaradoan colleagues were suitably impressed by the summons, which did not extend to the suppression of various risqué comments. Apparently, his summoner had something of a reputation.

"I won't have any problems," he told his colleagues. "I'm an old man."

"That's all right," a local sergeant guffawed. "From what I hear, she's kind of yesterday's wine herself."

They went so far as to give him a new cruiser to drive. After all, when he returned to Nogales, they would have to remain, perhaps to deal with her again, and they wanted him to make a good impression on the department's behalf. So he convoyed in comfort.

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He'd been in the governor's mansion in Phoenix once, for an official function. Compared to the house he now found himself approaching, that official residence was little more than a shack. His destination occupied several acres on a bend in the river — the real river, the old Colorado, not the nearby arrow-straight ship canal. The banks of the private peninsula on which the house was sited had been reinforced with flexible cladding to protect it from the rare possibility of flood or, more likely, dam failure on the upper river.

It was contemporary Southwest in design: two stories, artificial red-tile roof, inward-slanting walls of faux copper engraved with murals executed by an artist of obvious talent and probable fame. Lush tropical landscaping surrounded the house and covered the grounds, signifying the presence of someone sufficiently wealthy to afford enough expensive desalinated water to maintain the luxurian trees and shrubs.

He paused at an outer gate, a structure flimsy in appearance, but adequately electrified to fry any vehicle that might try to crash through, along with its occupants. The towering wall of ingrown mutated jumping cactus that enclosed the grounds was as green as it was deadly, a bioengineered barrier more effective than any that could be fashioned of concrete or metal. In effect, the house was guarded by a million toxic, attire-piercing needles.

Passing beyond this topiary terror, Cardenas found himself greeted at the entrance to the house by an elderly Hispanic of superb bearing and posture. The man looked like a refugee from an old movie, the sort of somber countenance off which Cantinflas used to bounce hilarious bons mots. Overhead misting units lowered the outside temperature from the unbearable to the merely hellacious. He was glad to be inside.

The servant led him across an entry tiled in black pyrite. One entire wall dripped water over hammered leaves of gold and copper, into a pool filled with glittering chicilids. The man left him in a room that boasted more floor space than Cardenas's entire house. A floor-to-ceiling arc of polarized glass looked out over the rush-lined sweep of ancient river. As he entered, both of the room's occupants rose to greet him.

Cardenas figured the man for his late twenties. He was tall, athletic, his features perfectly handsome according to current styles, so much so that they verged dangerously on the effeminate. But his handshake was firm, and his tone at once reverberant and accommodating. Smile and kind words notwithstanding, there was in his voice an undertone of something Cardenas

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found disconcerting. No one but another intuit would have picked up on it. Despite the man's presence and good looks, it was his companion who immediately drew Cardenas's attention, and not just because a woman's signature had been appended to his summons. She was slightly taller than he, but in no way statuesque, voluptuous without being overpowering. Her visage was dominated by a sharp-bridged, angular nose that might have been lifted from a classic Greek amphora. Dark hair tumbled around her in tight ringlets, framing her beautiful face. Cosmetic artisans had been at work there, but only to enhance what nature had given, not to replace or rebuild. She held a tall, frosted glass in both hands and wore a rather severe V-necked dress of floating niobium lamé. She was perhaps twenty years older than her male companion, and didn't look half of it.

"I appreciate your coming to see me, Sergeant." Her voice was like the river beyond the glass, he thought. Steady, eternal, commanding, deceptively gentle at the edges. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thanks," he told her. "You said you might have some information for me, Ms. Okolona?"

She seemed to hesitate, a gesture as much studied as genuine, as she glanced briefly over at her companion, who had taken a seat on a sand-colored couch large enough to hold seven people.

"Ramon convinced me I should talk to somebody."

Cardenas regarded the man, then the woman, and wondered why she should find the subterfuge necessary. From everything he had been told and had observed thus far, Sisu Sana Okolona was one of those entirely confident individuals who did not require approval of their actions from other human beings. He said nothing.

She began to pace. More for effect, he suspected, than from nervous need. "First it was that pet-store owner. Of course, what he was doing was illegal, but he didn't deserve to be murdered for it. Now that other man, Banquero — that was different." Her expression twisted. "By all accounts, he was a subhuman parasite, living off people as much as animals. But two other people got killed besides him, and a lot of others hurt." She halted, regarding him with violet eyes the color of fine amethyst. "I don't want anyone else hurt and blaming me for it."

Cardenas's brows rose. "You?"

"Didn't they tell you about me at your station?"

"I know that you're the president of Neurologic. I recognized the name

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Okolona."

She smiled thinly. "My late husband and I. We founded the company when no one believed in it. Throwing our lives and abilities away on obsolete technology, everyone told us. We built Neurologic up from nothing, Sergeant, with our hands and brains and little else. No technology is obsolete. Only applications. Well, we discovered and developed some new applications. One of which was the magifying controller and concomitant software."

"Ah," said Cardenas, understanding now.

"Of course, when Norris and I were working on the process, the magimal concept wasn't even a glimmer in our imagination. The neuromuscular-stimulation technology that we were interested in was originally developed to enable paralyzed individuals to move their limbs by sending stimulating electrical impulses directly to the requisite muscles by means of ultrathin wires. Originally these were taped to the epidermis. Later they were inserted beneath the skin, for cosmetic purposes.

"But when we started working with the technology, the biosurges were just learning how to regenerate damaged nerve tissue. That rendered electrical-stimulation technology unnecessary and extraneous. Nevertheless, my husband and I continued to work with it. We found other uses for the technology, not only in medical rehabilitation, but in research. The magimal concept came about as so many great commercial developments often do, by accident.

"We oppose the magifying of any exotic animals or danspecs. The idea originally was, and still is, to provide children with better pets. Puppies that can talk. Birds that can help out around the house. Pit bulls into which fail-safes can be installed. Steeplechasing horses that no longer have to be destroyed, because their riders can better help them avoid obstacles. Guard dogs that can not only run down criminals, but read them their rights and frisk them at no risk to the arresting officer. The magimal concept has been a great success."

"So, in addition to regretting the fact that magified animals were involved in the deaths of these people, you're also concerned about the possibility of adverse publicity," Cardenas observed succinctly.

She responded with a radiant smile, but it was a cold, controlled radiance of the sort to be found in fireflies and certain effulgent denizens of the deep ocean. "I know that you would not have been sent all the way

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from Nogales if you were not an unusually perceptive and sensitive practitioner of your profession, Sergeant. I see that additional explication would in your case be superficial."

"My concern is for the dead and injured," he told her, pointedly omitting any reference to a desire to spare the Neurologic Corporation bad publicity. "And in keeping this from happening again. That's why I'm here. You said you might have some information that would be of use to me. I won't deny that I could use some help.

"We think that some ninlocos may be involved, though, for the life of me, I don't know why. There's no motive for them. But an eyewitness put three at the scene of the first incident, and several survivors of the abortive *riña de gallos* gave descriptions of a girl similar to the one seen at the first murder site."

Sisu Okolona paused again, and this time her hesitation struck Cardenas as genuine. She glanced at her companion, who smiled and shrugged. Then she turned back to her patient visitor.

"Neurologic tries to track sales of our equipment, to prevent just the sort of illegal activities that the unfortunate pet-shop owner was engaged in. We're not in the investigative business, and we're not perfect. We're just concerned about quality and — I admit it — publicity. Components are marked, but, as I'm sure you know better than I, there's a vast underground market for all sorts of components." She walked to a table and opened a drawer, extracting a piece of paper.

"A young woman of interest to us is suspected of frequenting this address. Not being the police, we've had no reason to interfere with her movements or activities. But she is one of a number of suspicious people we do try to monitor. You see, Sergeant, we try to stay one step ahead of the kind of people who have recently been killed. Obviously, we are not always successful. You might pay this young person a visit and ask some of your questions. You might get an answer or two."

Cardenas took the paper, glanced at the address. "This would be here in Yumarado."

Okolona nodded once. "In the deep-industrial district, I believe. Where once, at high-summer midday, the temperature was reported to have hit fifty-six Celsius. Not a pleasant place. I would not like to go there."

"I don't mind the heat," Cardenas told her. "Although, as I get older, I seem to have less tolerance. For it, and for other things."

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A real smile this time. "You're not at all that old, Sergeant." It vanished quickly. "Be careful if you follow up on this. My people tell me that even though these individuals are little more than children, they can still be dangerous."

Cardenas put the paper in his shirt pocket. "I've taken down important criminals and real locos, Ms. Okolona, but the boy who blew my face away years ago was just nineteen. It doesn't take experience or strength to pull the trigger of a spitter."

"Are you sure you won't have that drink?"

"*Gracias*, but no. I guess I'm a glutton for work."

"Now that," she volunteered in kindly fashion, "will kill you far quicker than the heat."

VI

THE ADDRESS consisted more of directions than numbers, and he had to abandon the police cruiser outside the first alley. The narrow gap that separated two *maquiladora* plants was frantic with people, lower-grade assemblers and toters rushing to beat deadlines and the heat. He'd waited until evening, not only because it was cooler, but because he sensed he'd have a better chance of making the acquaintance of the contact at night. Ninlocos tended to sleep as much as possible during the hot day and emerge in the comparative cool of darkness, like any other sensible troglodytes.

Many of the *maquiladora* factories operated twin ten-hour shifts, with four off in between for maintenance and cleaning. With a surplus of labor drawn from CenAm, S.A., and the Mexican states, they could set their own hours and standards, and many did. Labor inspectors sometimes got paid to wink at substandard practices, but most of the big companies had to toe the line lest they risk a shutdown because of violations. They maintained government standards, not out of altruism, but because it was cheaper than having their lines halted even temporarily. But the smaller plants, the independent operations . . . Cardenas had over the years observed conditions in some of them that bordered on the inhuman. They were able to stay in business because there was always a surplus of labor, millions begging for the low-paying, dangerous work. Anything was better than trying to eke out a living tilling a few acres of corn with a mule, or potatoes

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in the Andes.

As night rode roughshod over fading evening, the day shift made way for their replacements, workers moving both ways jamming the warren of access alleys around the plants, until the last of the daytime personnel had escaped to the worker's warrens south of the Strip, and their nocturnal counterparts were on line. There were still people in the alleys and streets, but not nearly so many now, nor all so gainfully occupied. In addition to the massive factories, there were cafés and tiny service markets, outlet stores and discount marts that identified themselves by means of drifting holagel adverts and ambient neonics. They clung to the flanks of the plants like whale lice to favored cetaceans.

Cardenas's clothes worked overtime to cool him down, but along the Colorado, with its combination of desert inferno and river humidity, there was no choice but to sweat.

The combination of directions and numbers led him to a workers' hostel. Only the poorest of the poor, the true bottom-end laborers lived here, in the bowels of the city, because they couldn't afford to get out, couldn't afford the price even of a shuttle commute. There was no live desk clerk; only an automonitor that demanded his room card and had to be satisfied instead with his police identification.

Following directions, he rode the elevator to the top floor and exited into a hall that reeked of neglect and stale urine. Someone had managed to etch obscenities into one supposedly graffiti-resistant wall with a cutting laser or similar tool. There was barely enough light to illuminate the hall and its featureless, flush-set doors, the chemoluminescent strip tacked to the ceiling weak and long overdue for replacement.

The old aural stripping around the doors leaked, and he could hear sounds from within each apartment as he passed it: children crying, men and women arguing voiciferously, TVs blaring. He went to the end of the hall. There was a window, a single fixed pane of transparent plastic. The building's air-conditioning huffed reluctantly. On this top floor, it was stifling hot. The lower levels, he knew, wouldn't be much better.

He drew his gun, made sure the tracer sewn into his suit was activated, and thumbed the call-through. A tinny male voice barked back at him.

"Yeah?"

"Police, open up. I just want to ask you a few questions."

There was a pause. Cardenas's fingers tightened on his weapon. He

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didn't like this place, didn't like the delay. Much as he preferred to work alone, maybe he ought to have requisitioned backup for this one. But his tracer was on, and the room's occupants had no way of knowing he was by himself.

"Sure, hombre. Come on in." Cardenas heard the door seal unstick.

He found himself in a single room, somewhat larger than what he'd expected. There were two beds, rumpled and used, the cooling thermosheets stained beyond hope of color recovery. An ancient chair squatted beneath a window that was a match to the one in the hall. It offered the same dismal view of the alley and buildings. Cotton stuffing bulged from various holes in the upholstery like bloodless entrails.

The walls of the room were an incongruous, immutable pale pink splattered with faded images of butterflies. The choice of scheme was ironic. The dirty, polluted chunk of industrial Namerica that smothered the lowermost Colorado hadn't played host to a real butterfly in a hundred years.

Both boys looked to be in their late teens. One was tall, healthy-looking, dark skinned. The other had ear-length stringy blond hair and a stunned expression, as though he wandered through life under perpetual sedation. From the look of his bones and eyes, his condition wasn't due entirely to drugs, though. Cardenas saw that he suffered from congenital mental numbness.

The tall black kid nodded toward the pistol. "You just want to *habla*, *frion*, why the punch?"

"Regulations." Neither boy was armed, nor was there anything lethal visible in the room. Cardenas dropped his arm, letting the gun hang at his side, where they could see that it was still activated. He took in his surroundings. Maybe drugs for sale, if not for use, but that wasn't what he was here for.

"You guys know anything about some illegal magimals been involved in a couple of incidents recently?"

The tall boy laughed, his companion chiming in with a rasping giggle. "*Seguro, Frion.* Sure. We monitor the news every day."

"We don't know *nada*, man," added his equally hostile companion. "Anything else you wanna know?"

The combination of ignorance and pugnacious disdain might've been enough to put off a regular *federale*, but not Cardenas. There were too many

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pregnant syllables in the boys' phrasing, too many subtle, disquieting, revelatory shifts in their posture. He intuited that they were hiding something, that they knew more than the nothing they were saying. Staying alert, he strolled over to the far bed, eyed the door beyond.

"What's in there?"

"Bathroom, frío n," said the tall boy. "You got to take a leak, be our guests. But watch your booties. The pot leaks, too." He laughed again, studiously indifferent, but unable to hide the suggestive twinge of sudden anxiety the sergeant detected in his voice.

"Thanks." Cardenas hefted his pistol and pushed through the door.

He was ready for another boy; for a gun, for a stick. He was not ready for the two hundred kilos of distilled lightning and muscle that exploded in his face. The jaguar slammed him to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. Gold dust danced in his flickering vision as he struggled to aim his weapon. The big cat swatted it across the room, where the shorter boy rushed to recover it.

Cardenas found himself flat on his back, staring up into the jaguar's face. It snarled, canines that were proportionately the largest of all the big cats' a scant half meter from his face. If he moved, if he twitched, it could rip out his esophagus like so much garden hose.

"I ought to kill you right now," the jaguar growled. "A little bit at a time. Bite off your ears first. Or maybe your works. Chew 'em up slow." Nearby, the smaller boy laughed uproariously.

"How'd you find us?" The jaguar asked. When Cardenas didn't reply, a huge paw descended to completely cover the lower half of his face. Claws contracted, digging into the sides of his cheeks. Excruciating pain shot through the sergeant as his jawbones were ground together.

"He's scared shitless." The taller boy leaned casually against the wall. "He ain't gonna tell us nothing like that."

"You're right," said a new voice. The jaguar eased off Cardenas. He sat up slowly, his whole body aching from the collision. The big cat squatted on its hindquarters nearby, tail switching nervously back and forth. Its eyes were now closed.

From the bedroom behind the now-opened door, a woman emerged. A girl, really, Cardenas thought. She was slim, even skinny, with a faded, pinched kind of prettiness too much time spent on the streets imparts to certain children. She wore a peculiar silvery suit with the hood pushed back

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and integral gloves and boots. Hair the color of dirty oak was cut short and bound up on the crown of her head in a samurai knot that more than anything else resembled an antique shaving brush.

She nodded toward the big cat. "I've put him in sleep mode, but I can wake him up fast if you make me. Jaguars are light sleepers."

Cardenas staggered to his feet. The younger boy had the pistol trained on him. "Then I'll be careful to move slowly. You're not very hospitable to visitors."

"You're no visitor," she snapped. "You're a *frío*n, a cop, the chill. How'd you find us so fast?"

Cardenas responded with an accusation. "You were the ones at the pet shop, and the cockfight. You caused the trouble."

She shook her head, pushed out her lower lip. "*They* caused the trouble, exploiting animals like that. Not me. Goddamn Neurologic components."

"Magifying animals is legal in the Southwest, except for the Californias. You may not like it, but that's the way it is. Magifying exotics is illegal, though. But you don't kill the violators. Turn them in, and let the law take care of them."

"I'd rather take care of them myself." She indicated the jaguar. "When we found Chimu in San Juana, he was being used in a sex show. I won't tell you how. The people who'd had him magified were making him do things no cat was designed to do, making him move in ways no cat was designed to move. Twisting his bones and muscles out of position, hurting him." She grinned wolfishly. "We freed him to react naturally."

"It hasn't come to my attention that anyone in San Juana has been killed by a jaguar."

Her smile lingered. "After I let Chimu null the two *pendejos* who'd been mistreating him, he was hungry. They never fed him properly, either. So I let him eat them. Jaguars are very thorough diners. When he 'd finished, there was nothing much left for anyone to get excited about. Poetic justice."

"You strike me as a very bright young lady. Too bright to be messing around with something like this. How do you program the animals to react and talk like that?"

"I don't. I won't program anything. But I'll borrow. See." She touched one switch among the many on her right sleeve. Almost instantly, the jaguar was on its feet, alert and awake.

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The girl raised her left arm. The jaguar mimicked the gesture perfectly with its left foreleg. She made a circle with her hand in the air. So did the big cat. When she tilted her head to one side, the animal did likewise. When she took a swipe in Cardenas's direction, he felt the simultaneous *whoosh* of air as the cat's claws missed him by centimeters.

"I don't work through chips," she told him proudly. "I've got a steady-state broadcast unit in the suit that records the actions of my muscles. The animal's controller receives the information and transposes my movements accordingly. My suit reads my movements and gestures and conveys them to the broadcast unit, which passes the action digitally to the neurologic controller in the animal, which matches my movements gesture for gesture. Unlike in the old paraplegic outfits, the stim filaments in my suit are coded for pickup, not distribution."

"Pretty clever," Cardenas admitted. "So the animals are only imitating your movements, your gestures, and not reacting to some embedded program."

"That's it, *frío*n."

"So they haven't killed anyone. You have."

Her smile vanished. "You're awfully stupid for such an old cop, but then, you were awfully stupid for coming here in the first place. You still haven't answered my question." She straightened and grabbed for him. The jaguar rose on its hind legs and wrapped a paw around Cardenas's right hand. "Tell me, or I'll have Chimu pull off your fingers one at a time."

He could feel the pressure, as if his hand had been encased in a heated vice. "Take it easy. What difference does it make?"

She approached and pushed her face close to his own. The jaguar was right next to her, its fangs wet and sharp. "That's my business." She touched a control, and when her hands started going through his pockets, the jaguar did not mimic the gestures.

She found his wallet, which she tossed to the tall boy, and his police vorec, which she gave to the shorter one. Eventually she found the slip of paper containing the directions.

"*Mira* this, Twotrick." The tall boy took the paper.

"*Mierde*! Okolona letterhead." He wadded the paper into a ball and threw it aside.

"I guess I'm not surprised. It's my fault. I should've expected it." Her hands balled into tiny fists.

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Cardenas felt the bones in his fingers grinding together as the jaguar's paw contracted. He wanted to scream, but clenched his teeth and sucked it in.

"No more of this," she muttered. She looked and sounded suddenly tired. "No more."

"Hey Gagrito!" The shorter boy looked up from where he'd been playing with Cardenas's vorec. "You ain't giving up, are you? The game's just getting good and started."

"Ball it, Gluey," she shot back. "It's no fun if they know. But we can still endgame, *verdad*?" The shorter boy jammed the vorec in his pocket as he hopped off the bed, nodding eagerly.

When she looked back at Cardenas, there was a horrific blankness in her eyes, as if he were no longer there. He knew that look, but had never encountered it before on the face of one quite so young.

"We're leaving." Her voice had grown distant, surreal. "You can stay and keep Chimu company."

"Now wait. . . ."

She held up her balled fist, and he winced at the increased pressure on his hand. "My range is about twenty meters. As soon as we're on our way down in the elevator, the connection will be broken. Then Chimu will be on his own. So will you."

They left hurriedly, Gluey favoring Cardenas with a last nervous giggle as he shut the door behind him. The sergeant stood there gazing at the jaguar, his right hand throbbing with pain in the animal's grip. It could be counted on to react suddenly and instinctively when the girl's control was released. Striking at its eyes might buy him a second or two, Cardenas thought tensely. Probably the three ninlocos were already stepping into the battered, rickety elevator. He had only seconds left in which to do something, anything.

The jaguar's posture, standing erect on its hind legs, was completely foreign to the animal. For the moment, it was being ordered to hold onto him, and that was all.

So he kicked it as hard as he could between its hind legs.

The gesture was remarkably productive. The paw clutching his right hand let go, and the animal dropped and rolled onto its back. Cardenas sprang for the door and wrenched at the handle as the big cat yowled thunderously behind him. The handle wouldn't budge.

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They'd locked it from the outside.

Already the jaguar was scrambling back onto its feet. Having previously been introduced to the taste of human flesh, Cardenas doubted it would stop with just killing him. Not that the final disposition of his corpus would matter to him once he'd been eviscerated. He looked around wildly, then sprinted to his right even as the cat was digging into the floor with its claws, gathering itself to leap.

The cheap plastic window shattered as Cardenas flew through it, arms crossed protectively in front of his face, the frame snapping like cardboard, the fragments of inexpensive transparency cutting his hands and arms. The big cat, never hesitating, followed.

The cable he'd noticed from inside the room felt like it was going to slice through his armpits as he slammed against it and convulsively curled his arms, his body and legs swinging wildly five floors above the alley. He felt a claw rip his pant leg. Screeching, yowling, twisting, the jaguar plummeted earthward. The last sound it made was an audible thud as it struck the unyielding pavement far below

Cardenas dangled suspended in the sweltering night air, his muscles aching. He could feel warm wetness beginning to trickle from beneath both arms. Across the alley a window opened, and a face appeared. He yelled in its direction. Dimly aware that while his lips were parted and moving, no sound was emerging, he tried again.

The window slammed shut; the face disappeared. Cursing, he began to pull himself hand over hand along the cable, heading for the building to which it was attached. There was a roof there, lower than the room from which he'd so precipitously exited. His progress was agonizingly slow, but steady.

VII

THEY WANTED him admitted to the hospital, but had to settle for patching him up. Via vorec he supplied the night shift with a thorough description of the three ninlocos as well as their modus. Then he called Sisu Okolona to warn her that the trio now had her address. Having spoken of "ending the game," the girl called Gagrito might decide that the best way to punish Neurologic was to try to take some sort of revenge on its corporate head. Okolona assured him she

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would take the necessary precautions, and not to concern himself, because her home was quite inviolable. An army of ninlocos couldn't force their way in.

Thus reassured somewhat, he allowed the biosurges to go back to work on him. They repaired the bones of his right hand, though it would be in a cast for some weeks, and sealed the wounds beneath his arms where the cable had cut. By midafternoon of the following day, he'd pulled rank to get himself discharged.

The first thing he wanted to do was talk to Okolona in person again. He should have called for assistance when he first saw the gate in the cactus fence slightly ajar, but decided not to. Probably it simply hadn't shut all the way after its last use, and Okolona had assured him with confidence the previous night of her home's impregnability. Such technocratic Xanadus generally were.

No servant appeared to greet him, but when he identified himself, the door clicked open to grant admittance. Only when he stepped inside did he feel the gun in his back.

A familiar giggle sounded behind him. "You oughta be dead, *frío*n. Why ain't you dead?"

"I'm quicker than you think, niño."

"Not quicker than your own gun, I bet. Waft." Cardenas started forward.

They were all in the big room that overlooked the river. Sisu Okolona sat on the big couch, with her edgy paramour close by. Twotrick leaned against an exquisite Victorian sideboard, picking at his nails with a titanium stiletto. Her silver suit dirty and greasy, the girl Gagrito stood confronting the couple on the couch.

The manservant who had greeted Cardenas on his last visit lay sprawled in a hallway nearby, his blood filling the grout lines between the black pyrite tiles.

The girl glared at him. If she wasn't insane, she was borderline, Cardenas saw instantly. There would be no reasoning with her.

"You officious prick. What've you done with Chimu?"

"He's not hungry anymore," Cardenas told her quietly, looking for an opening.

"*Mierde*." She turned back to the couch. The mistress of the grand house looked utterly self-possessed, as always. "That's the last animal whose death you're going to be responsible for."

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"I am not responsible for the death of any animal," replied Okolona tightly. "Neurologic only builds the components, the majority of which are given over to perfectly legitimate uses."

"Legitimate, yeah. Like making hamsters jump through flaming hoops, and parakeets recite Shakespeare. Forcing animals into unnatural activities that age them prematurely. You cold, heartless bitch; you wouldn't know a 'legitimate' animal if it jumped up and bit you on the ass." The fury of her response startled Cardenas.

Okolona was unruffled. "I cannot supervise every application of every component the company manufactures. It is an unfortunate but inescapable fact that this world is home to some immoral people."

"Unlike you, of course," Gagrito practically spat.

Cardenas felt a need to try and direct the conversation. "It's the suit," he informed Okolona. "It conveys her movements to the controller units, and the animals mimic her gestures."

Okolona shook her head. "That's impossible. The controller sequences are all heavily encoded. Two Cribyms working in tandem couldn't crack them." Her gaze shifted back to the girl. "You couldn't."

"I didn't have to." Gagrito grinned. "Somebody gave them to me."

Some of the color left Okolona's face. "Only half a dozen people have access to the encoding sequence, and you wouldn't have anything they'd want badly enough to trade for it."

"He did." With great delight the girl pointed to the man sitting on the far end of the couch.

Okolona gaped at him, then slumped slightly. "It's true, isn't it? She's telling the truth. Why?"

"Because I gave him what he wanted," the girl declared triumphantly when Ramon declined to respond. "I gave him *everything* he wanted. Did you think he was so fine, so pure? Isn't the fact that he was interested in you proof enough to the contrary? You're old. Well preserved. As well preserved as money can preserve, but under all the attitudes and work and experience, you're old. Too *old* to satisfy him all the time. I'm not, and your boyfriend, well, while he made it clear that you were his main food line, he wasn't averse to availing himself of a little willing young stuff on the side."

For the first time, Okolona's composure was shaken. "You gave her a coding sequence for the controllers?"

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"I didn't think it would do any harm." Ramon was on the verge of babbling. "She obviously wasn't an industrial spy. She said she just wanted it for herself, to fool around with, that it would help her with her hobby. She showed me the suit, told me what it was for, what she was trying to do with it. She said the coding sequence would help with some algorithms, whatever those are. I didn't see the harm. . . ."

"You didn't see . . .?" Okolona lowered her voice. "You didn't see. Of course you didn't."

"Isn't that what you always told me?" Gagrito paced the floor like some gangly, predatory bird. "That to get what you wanted, to achieve your goals, you had to do whatever was necessary, give up whatever was required?"

"I never meant. . . ."

"Just like you never meant to kill Squirt." The trembling in the girl's voice belied something deep, Cardenas sensed. Very deep.

"You two know each other," he said flatly. It more than explained how she'd been able to gain entrance to the mansion.

The girl whirled on him, her expression a maelstrom of fury and revulsion. "She's my goddamn mother, *frion*. I had a cat once, a long time ago. A long, long time ago. A cat and a father. She killed them both."

Okolona's voice rose, shaky but still vibrant. "Your father died of a heart condition!"

"Which you aggravated; pushing him, driving him, always reaching, always striving, always. You didn't just help him into an early grave; you shoved him in."

"He wanted success as much as I did! He wanted Neurologic!"

"*You* wanted Neurologic," the girl snarled. "Daddy wanted food, and a roof over our heads, and maybe, eventually, some recognition for all his years of slaving. But that wasn't good enough for you. You had to be on top. You had to be bitch queen of neuronics, a duchess of the Strip. So you kept pushing him, and pushing him, and finally he gave up and died. It was a way out.

"And Squirt. Why'd you have to take my cat?" She was crying now, crying and accusing all at once. "Why couldn't you have found some other animal to try your damn rotten stinking controller on?"

"That was an accident. I've explained it to you over and over. An accident. It should have worked perfectly. It had been tested repeatedly. I thought you'd like Squirt better after it was done, thought you'd be pleased

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and surprised with what she could do. The only cat in the world who could do such things. The only one."

"I just wanted a cat!" Gagrito screamed. "My cat! Squirt. An ordinary, smelly, warm, furry cat. Not something that could do high-wire tricks and navigate the fucking car. Just a cat. And you killed that. Squirt wasn't good enough for you the way she was. You had to try and improve her. Like you had to try and improve everything and everybody else."

"I did it for you," Okolona insisted. "It didn't work out; it was a tragedy, that cat, but I did it for you."

"*Mierde*, you never did anything for anybody in your life except yourself. You were always improving things. Nothing was ever good enough." She grinned nastily then, and her expression bore more than a little in common with the dead jaguar's. "I learned a lot from you. I studied real hard. I designed this suit, and Twotrick helped a great deal. They threw him out of medical school, and we found each other, and he helped. I can make improvements, too!"

Cardenas tensed as she touched a switch on her sleeve. But no animals leaped into the room — no big cats, no large fanged dogs, no poisonous snakes or hulking bears.

On the far end of the couch, Ramon twitched. His eyes became small moons. Gagrito raised her right hand, clenched her fingers into a fist. Ramon mimicked the gesture, gazing in horror at his own out-of-control extremities. He gaped at her. "What . . . Nilaa . . . what?"

"When you were asleep." Her tone would have iced lava. "Twotrick rented a place, equipment, assistants. He did it. I drugged you; you woke up and never realized. He did it." She pirouetted, and he rose from the couch and duplicated the movement with fluid masculine grace.

"The stim wires. You're full of 'em. They're all in your legs and your arms. In your hands and your feet. It wasn't hard. The system works just as well on people as on animals. The controller's in your back, up high where you can't feel it. No voice box, though. We didn't give you a second voice box. You're such a smooth talker on your own."

"But *why*, Nilaa! Why?"

"Because you were with her." The girl gestured at the paralyzed Okolona. "Because I was only an amusement for you, a diversion, a compliant perversion you could wallow in whenever you felt the urge. Because I knew she'd marry you eventually, and I couldn't really see myself calling you

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'Daddy,' now could I? But mostly because she wanted you; she liked you. So I thought I'd help, to her way of thinking, by improving you. God knows you could stand some improvement. Just as she improved poor little Squirt." Eyes blazing, she stared at the suddenly broken woman slumped on the couch.

"How about it, Mother dear? How do you like your new and improved fiancé? Isn't he elegant? Isn't he graceful?" She twisted and bent, jumped and kicked. An expression of ineffable horror on his face, Ramon mimicked every one of her movements as earnestly as his older male body could.

Entranced, perfectly focused, she drew her knife and tossed it to him, clutching with her hand, making him grab it. He gawked at the blade in horror, wanting to let go, to drop it, to throw it aside, but unable to command his fingers, unable to let loose. She turned toward the couch.

Okolona started to edge to her right, trying to divide her attention between Ramon and her daughter. "This won't bring your father back, it won't bring back your cat, and it won't slow production at Neurologic."

"No, no," agreed Gagrito in a tone turned unexpectedly gentle, mesmerized by her own audacity. "But maybe, just maybe, it'll let me sleep without any more nightmares, without too much thinking. Maybe it'll put an end to some of the remembering." As she approached the couch, so did Ramon, struggling with his own legs.

"Nilaa, I'm your *mother*."

The girl halted. Behind him, Cardenas heard Gluey giggling, "Go on: do it, do it, Gagrito!"

"No." She retreated. So did Ramon. "No, she's right. I've hated her for so long I can't hate anymore. All I can do is finish it. Somehow. Endgame."

"No!" Cardenas took a step forward. Eager Gluey jammed the pistol into the small of his back.

The girl made a sweeping motion. Casual, relaxed, as if she were dancing in her sleep. Okolona screamed.

Emitting a terrified croak, Ramon simultaneously brought his hand up and around and, in flawless imitation of the girl's gesture, neatly cut his own throat.

"Ramon!" Okolona abandoned the couch and ran toward her lover, who, shaking violently, collapsed to the floor. Silently, the girl wrapped her arms around herself. In imitation the flopping Ramon drew Okolona to

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him, blood spurting from his throat, splashing her in the face, the neck, the chest. Gluey and Twotrick looked on raptly, utterly captivated. The boy giggled uncontrollably, tracing slow circles against Cardenas's spine with the muzzle of the gun. Cardenas intuited something in the boy's laugh: a moment of distraction, an instant of indifference, preoccupation with the gruesome scene being played out before them.

Cardenas was small and old. And deceptive.

Spinning with unexpected speed, he chopped down on the boy's wrist and sent the gun flying. It hit the tiles and slid under the second couch. Twotrick rushed forward, blade at the ready, but Cardenas was ready for him. He blocked the half-wild, undisciplined blow and kicked out straight, crunching the boy's knee. Twotrick howled and went down, dropping the stiletto.

Gagrito whirled and pantomimed an advance. Shoving the hysterical Okolona off his chest, a vacant-eyed Ramon rose and staggered toward the sergeant, blood pumping from the slash in his throat, the dripping knife held high.

Retreating, Cardenas fumbled in a pocket until his fingers locked around the spare power cell he carried for his vorec. Activating it with a flick of his thumbnail, he threw it at the girl. It struck her in the stomach.

There was a brief, brilliant flash, bright as mystic visitation, and she screamed as the stim wires woven into the suit conducted the open charge, shorting out the entire system, feeding back to her muscles. She fell, collapsing, twitching uncontrollably as the system went crazy, throwing her own muscles into mad spasms. Freed of her influence, Ramon folded, clutching at his throat.

Cardenas scrambled to recover the pistol from beneath the couch. By the time he sat up, Gluey was already gone, having fled through the double doors. Twotrick lay on his side on the floor, clutching his shattered knee and bawling like a betrayed virgin. Gradually, the girl went immobile. A few wisps of thin, acrid smoke rose from her body. He couldn't tell if she was dead.

He tore off his shirt and jammed it into the hole in Ramon's neck while Okolona cradled the head of her lover in her lap, rocking back and forth and wailing softly.

"Call for help," he ordered her. "Ambulance first, then police. Do it!" he shouted when she didn't react.

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Her eyes came up to gaze dumbly into his. For a long moment, the madness and the sorrow held sway. Then they receded as a fragment of the iron will that had built Neurologic reasserted itself. She rose and stumbled toward a phone.

Cardenas stayed there, holding the rag tight against Ramon's throat. Later, much later, he was told that the parameds had somehow managed to save him. The sergeant was neither pleased nor disappointed. By the letter of the law, the man was guilty of nothing but bad judgment and being a lousy human being.

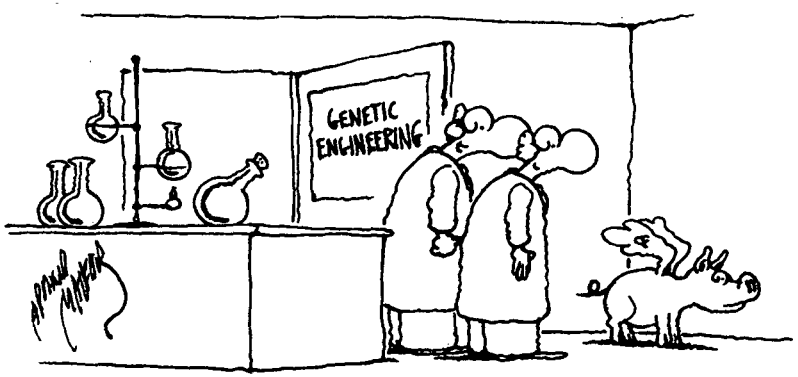
The girl was in a coma. Cataleptic shock, the biosurges said. As much self-induced as the result of feedback from her damaged suit.

Cardenas methodically filled out his report. It took a long time, and he had to stop several times, leaving and then returning to the extensive, impersonal form. When he'd finished, he inquired one more time about Nilaa Okolona before starting back to Nogales. He didn't ask about the mother.

No change, they told him. Vital signs steady, nervous system unresponsive. Did he wish to be kept apprised of her condition?

He did not. Experience had taught him that it's not good for a *fríon*, a cop, to become too involved in his work, to get too close to people.

Especially to a ninloco girl who would choose to nickname herself the screaming kitten.



"You realize, Jacobs, this could very well make skepticism obsolete."

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

MAGNETIC VISION

HERE ON my desk I have something that can only be described as miraculous. It's a big cardboard envelope with nine thick sheets of black plastic inside, and on these sheets are pictures of my own brain.

These images are "MRI scans" — magnetic resonance imagery from a medical scanner.

These are magnetic windows into the lightless realm inside my skull. The meat, bone, and various gristles within my head glow gently in crisp black-and-white detail. There's little of the foggy ghostliness one sees with, say, dental x-rays. Held up against a bright light, or placed on a diagnostic light table, the dark plastic sheets reveal veins, arteries, various odd fluid-stuffed ventricles, and the spongy wrinkles of my cerebellum. In various shots, I can see the pulp within my own teeth, the roots of my tongue, the boney caverns of my sinuses, and the nicely spherical jellies that are my two eyeballs. I can see that the human brain really does come in two lobes and in three sections, and that it has gray matter and white matter. The brain is a big whopping gland, basically, and it fills my skull just like the meat of a walnut.

It's an odd experience to look long and hard at one's own brain. Though it's quite a privilege to witness this, it's also a form of narcissism without much historical parallel. Frankly, I don't think I ever really believed in my own brain until I saw these images. At least, I never truly comprehended my brain as a tangible physical organ, like a knuckle or a kneecap. And yet here is the evidence, laid out irrefutably before me, pixel by monochrome pixel, in a large variety of angles and in exquisite detail. And I'm told that my brain is quite healthy and perfectly normal — anatomically at least. (For a science fiction writer this news is something of a letdown.)

The discovery of X-rays in 1895, by Wilhelm Roentgen, led to the

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first technology that made human flesh transparent. Nowadays, X-rays can pierce the body through many different angles to produce a graphic three-dimensional image. This 3-D technique, "Computerized Axial Tomography" or the CAT-scan, won a Nobel Prize in 1979 for its originators, Godfrey Hounsfield and Allan Cormack.

Sonography uses ultrasound to study human tissue through its reflection of high-frequency vibration: sonography is a sonic window.

Magnetic resonance imaging, however, is a more sophisticated window yet. It is rivalled only by the lesser-known and still rather experimental PET-scan, or Positron Emission Tomography. PET-scanning requires an injection of radioactive isotopes into the body so that their decay can be tracked within human tissues. Magnetic resonance, though it is sometimes known as Nuclear Magnetic Resonance, does not involve radioactivity.

The phenomenon of "nuclear magnetic resonance" was discovered in 1946 by Edward Purcell of Harvard, and Felix Block of Stanford. Purcell and Block were working separately, but published their findings within a month of one another. In 1952, Purcell and Block won a joint Nobel Prize for their discovery.

If an atom has an odd number of protons and neutrons, it will have what is known as a "magnetic moment:" it will spin, and its axis will tilt in a certain direction. When that tilted nucleus is put into a magnetic field, the axis of the tilt will change, and the nucleus will also wobble at a certain speed. If radio waves are then beamed at the wobbling nucleus at just the proper wavelength, they will cause the wobbling to intensify — this is the "magnetic resonance" phenomenon. The resonant frequency is known as the Larmor frequency, and the Larmor frequencies vary for different atoms.

Hydrogen, for instance, has a Larmor frequency of 42.58 megahertz. Hydrogen, which is a major constituent of water and of carbohydrates such as fat, is very common in the human body. If radio waves at this Larmor frequency are beamed into magnetized hydrogen atoms, the hydrogen nuclei will absorb the resonant energy until they reach a state of excitation. When the beam goes off, the hydrogen nuclei will relax again, each nucleus emitting a tiny burst of radio energy as it returns to its original state. The nuclei will also relax at slightly different rates, depending on the chemical circumstances around the hydrogen atom. Hydrogen behaves differently in different kinds of human tissue. Those relaxation bursts can be detected, and timed, and mapped.

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The enormously powerful magnetic field within an MRI machine can permeate the human body; but the resonant Larmor frequency is beamed through the body in thin, precise slices. The resulting images are neat cross-sections through the body. Unlike X-rays, magnetic resonance doesn't ionize and possibly damage human cells. Instead, it gently coaxes information from many different types of tissue, causing them to emit tell-tale signals about their chemical makeup. Blood, fat, bones, tendons, all emit their own characteristics, which a computer then reassembles as a graphic image on a computer screen, or prints out on emulsion-coated plastic sheets.

An X-ray is a marvelous technology, and a CAT-scan more marvelous yet. But an X-ray does have limits. Bones cast shadows in X-radiation, making certain body areas opaque or difficult to read. And X-ray images are rather stark and anatomical; an X-ray image cannot even show if the patient is alive or dead. An MRI scan, on the other hand, will reveal a great deal about the composition and the health of living tissue. For instance, tumor cells handle their fluids differently than normal tissue, giving rise to a slightly different set of signals. The MRI machine itself was originally invented as a cancer detector.

After the 1946 discovery of magnetic resonance, MRI techniques were used for thirty years to study small chemical samples. However, a cancer researcher, Dr. Raymond Damadian, was the first to build an MRI machine large enough and sophisticated enough to scan an entire human body, and then produce images from that scan. Many scientists, most of them even, believed and said that such a technology was decades away, or even technically impossible. Damadian had a tough, prolonged struggle to find funding for his visionary technique, and he was often dismissed as a zealot, a crackpot, or worse. Damadian's struggle and eventual triumph is entertainingly detailed in his 1985 biography, *A Machine Called Indomitable.*

Damadian was not much helped by his bitter and public rivalry with his foremost competitor in the field, Paul Lauterbur. Lauterbur, an industrial chemist, was the first to produce an actual magnetic-resonance image, in 1973. But Damadian was the more technologically ambitious of the two. His machine, "Indomitable," (now in the Smithsonian Museum) produced the first scan of a human torso, in 1977. (As it happens, it was Damadian's own torso.) Once this proof-of-concept had been thrust before a doubting world, Damadian founded a production company, and became the father of

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the MRI scanner industry.

By the end of the 1980s, medical MRI scanning had become a major enterprise, and Damadian had won the National Medal of Technology, along with many other honors. As MRI machines spread worldwide, the market for CAT-scanning began to slump in comparison. Today, MRI is a two-billion dollar industry, and Dr. Damadian and his company, Fonar Corporation, have reaped the fruits of success. (Some of those fruits are less sweet than others: today Damadian and the Fonar Corp. are suing Hitachi and General Electric in federal court, for alleged infringement of Damadian's patents.)

MRIs are marvelous machines — perhaps, according to critics, a little too marvelous. The magnetic fields emitted by MRIs are extremely strong, strong enough to tug wheelchairs across the hospital floor, to wipe the data off the magnetic strips in credit cards, and to whip a wrench or screwdriver out of one's grip and send it hurtling across the room. If the patient has any metal imbedded in his skin — welders and machinists, in particular, often do have tiny painless particles of shrapnel in them — then these bits of metal will be wrenched out of the patient's flesh, producing a sharp bee-sting sensation. And in the invisible grip of giant magnets, heart pacemakers can simply stop.

MRI machines can weigh ten, twenty, even one hundred tons. And they're big — the scanning cavity, in which the patient is inserted, is about the size and shape of a sewer pipe, but the huge plastic hull surrounding that cavity is taller than a man and longer than a plush limo. A machine of that enormous size and weight cannot be moved through hospital doors; instead, it has to be delivered by crane, and its shelter constructed around it. That shelter must not have any iron construction rods in it or beneath its floor, for obvious reasons. And yet that floor had better be very solid indeed.

Superconductive MRIs present their own unique hazards. The superconductive coils are supercooled with liquid helium. Unfortunately there's an odd phenomenon known as "quenching," in which a superconductive magnet, for reasons rather poorly understood, will suddenly become merely-conductive. When a "quench" occurs, an enormous amount of electrical energy suddenly flashes into heat, which makes the liquid helium boil violently. The MRI's technicians might be smothered or frozen by boiling helium, so it has to be vented out the roof, requiring the installation of specialized vent-stacks. Helium leaks, too, so it must be resupplied frequently, at considerable expense.

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The MRI complex also requires expensive graphic-processing computers, CRT screens, and photographic hard-copy devices. Some scanners feature elaborate telecommunications equipment. Like the giant scanners themselves, all these associated machines require power-surge protectors, line conditioners, and backup power supplies. Fluorescent lights, which produce radio-frequency noise pollution, are forbidden around MRIs. MRIs are also very bothered by passing CB radios, paging systems, and ambulance transmissions. It is generally considered a good idea to sheathe the entire MRI cubicle (especially the doors, windows, electrical wiring, and plumbing) in expensive, well-grounded sheet-copper.

Despite all these drawbacks, the United States today rejoices in possession of some two thousand MRI machines. (There are hundreds in other countries as well.) The cheaper models cost a solid million dollars each; the top-of-the-line models, two million. Five million MRI scans were performed in the United States last year, at prices ranging from six hundred dollars, to twice that price and more.

In other words, in 1991 alone, Americans sank some five billion dollars in health care costs into the miraculous MRI technology.

Today America's hospitals and diagnostic clinics are in an MRI arms race. Manufacturers constantly push new and improved machines into the market, and other hospitals feel a dire need to stay with the state-of-the-art. They have little choice in any case, for the balky, temperamental MRI scanners wear out in six years or less, even when treated with the best of care.

Patients have little reason to refuse an MRI test, since insurance will generally cover the costs. MRIs are especially good for testing for neurological conditions, and since a lot of complaints, even quite minor ones, might conceivably be neurological, a great many MRI scans are performed. The tests aren't painful, and they're not considered risky. Having one's tissues briefly magnetized is considered far less risky than the fairly gross ionization damage caused by X-rays. The most common form of MRI discomfort is simple claustrophobia. MRIs are as narrow as the grave, and also very loud, with sharp mechanical clacking and buzzing.

But the results are marvels to behold, and MRIs have clearly saved many lives. And the tests will eliminate some potential risks to the patient, and put the physician on surer ground with his diagnosis. So why not just go ahead and take the test?

MRIs have gone ahead boldly. Unfortunately, miracles rarely come

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cheap. Today the United States spends thirteen percent of its Gross National Product on health care, and health insurance costs are drastically outstripping the rate of inflation.

High-tech, high-cost resources such as MRIs generally go to the well-to-do and the well-insured. This practice has sad repercussions. While some lives are saved by technological miracles — and this is a fine thing — other lives are lost, that might have been rescued by fairly cheap and common public-health measures, such as better nutrition, better sanitation, or better prenatal care. As advanced nations go, the United States has a rather low general life expectancy, and a quite bad infant-death rate; conspicuously worse, for instance, than Italy, Japan, Germany, France, and Canada.

MRI may be a true example of a technology genuinely ahead of its time. It may be that the genius, grit, and determination of Raymond Damadian brought into the 1980s a machine that might have been better suited to the technical milieu of the 2010s. What MRI really requires for everyday workability is some cheap, simple, durable, powerful superconductors. Those are simply not available today, though they would seem to be just over the technological horizon. In the meantime, we have built thousands of magnetic windows into the body that will do more or less what CAT-scan X-rays can do already. And though they do it better, more safely, and more gently than X-rays can, they also do it at a vastly higher price.

Damadian himself envisioned MRIs as a cheap mass-produced technology. "In ten to fifteen years," he is quoted as saying in 1985, "we'll be able to step into a booth — they'll be in shopping malls or department stores — put a quarter in it, and in a minute it'll say you need some Vitamin A, you have some bone disease over here, your blood pressure is a touch high, and keep a watch on that cholesterol." A thorough medical checkup for twenty-five cents in 1995! If one needed proof that Raymond Damadian was a true visionary, one could find it here.

Damadian even envisioned a truly advanced MRI machine capable of not only detecting cancer, but of killing cancerous cells outright. These machines would excite not hydrogen atoms, but phosphorus atoms, common in cancer-damaged DNA. Damadian speculated that certain Larmor frequencies in phosphorus might be specific to cancerous tissue; if that were the case, then it might be possible to pump enough energy into those phosphorus nuclei so that they actually shivered loose from the cancer cell's

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DNA, destroying the cancer cell's ability to function, and eventually killing it.

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A vision like the inside of your own brain, for instance.

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M. Shayne Bell has written a number of short stories, which were published in Amazing Stories, Writers of the Future, *and* Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *Baen Books published his first novel,* Nicoji, *in 1991. "With Rain and a Dog Barking" marks Shayne's first appearance in F&SF.*

With Rain, and a Dog Barking

By M. Shayne Bell

I DON'T HEAR MOST noises in Salt Lake City. I've gotten used to city noise, and my mind ignores all the sirens, the engine backfires, the startup of traffic when the lights turn green. I realize how surrounded by sound I am only when I go home to Idaho and walk out in the night and hear how profoundly still it is. But in Salt Lake last April 15, at 11:30 at night, I realized the Barretos' black Labrador had been barking next door for some time. I remember the date and the time because I had just finished my taxes and had gotten up to get my coat and the car keys, turn off the lights, and drive down to the post office.

I walked outside and looked over the fence to see if anything was going on in the Barretos' yard. I try to watch the Barreto place since Elicardes died of a heart attack in March. Besides, you learn early when you grow up on a farm that you should not ignore a persistently barking dog. Dogs bark for reasons:

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sometimes reasons you *can* ignore, like a homeless person looking for aluminum cans in the trash, and sometimes not. You'd better find out which.

I couldn't see the dog at first — it was dark outside — but I could hear it barking in the Barretos' backyard. It had been raining, and the grass was wet. I put my tax envelopes in the car, then walked back along the fence between our places, looking for what, I asked myself — a stray cat? A prowler? The dog knew what was normal and what wasn't, so something was going on.

But I couldn't see a prowler. There wouldn't have been a place for one to hide, really, in the Barretos' backyard. They had a flowering plum tree in the back corner between our yards, two spruce pines in the opposite corner, a swing set and sandbox. The dog was barking by the plum tree, so I walked back to it. I couldn't make out anything up in the tree, but I could see the dog. He was standing close to the trunk of the plum and barking. I whispered his name: "Lucky."

He stopped barking and looked at me. I crouched down and stretched a hand between the slats of the fence. "Here, Lucky."

He walked over and smelled my hand. He knew me. I petted his head, and he licked my hand. He was shaking, wet from the rain. I looked up at the tree, but nobody was in it. I could have seen that. I thought maybe a cat could be hiding up there. Lucky usually didn't bark at cats — he actually seemed to like them — but maybe this was one he didn't take to for some reason. "Quiet down, Lucky," I said, and I left to mail my taxes. He was barking again when I got back.

In the night, Edwardo, the youngest Barreto boy, opened his window and shouted for the dog to shut up. I realized he was making more of a whine now. I got up and looked out my kitchen window into the Barretos' yard. The dog was standing on the back step, whining at the tree. A light was on in the Andersons', the house on the other side of the Barretos'.

Maria came out and talked to Lucky in a low voice and petted him. She walked over under the plum tree, looked around, and after a few minutes walked back inside her house. The dog was quiet while Maria was outside, but he started barking as soon as she closed the door.

In the morning, he was still barking and whining. I watched him for a minute from my window. He was sitting on the back step where it was dry, still barking at the plum tree. I drank a glass of orange juice, pulled on my

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boots and a hat, grabbed a broom, and walked out under the branches of the plum that stretched over the fence and shaded part of my yard, too. The morning smelled rancid, like the city. Petals were falling from the tree in the still air, and they mottled the grass. I thought it was early for the petals to fall. Maria walked out when she saw me poking around in the branches of the tree, knocking rainwater down on top of me. It would run down the broomstick onto my hands and up my sleeves.

"What's up there?" Maria asked.

"I don't know," I said. The dog had followed her over and had stopped barking as if he were confident we were finally going to do something to put a stop to whatever was bothering him.

"I came out earlier and looked," she said. "I couldn't see anything."

I couldn't see anything, either, or drive anything out with my broomstick. "There has to be something up there," I said. I jumped over the fence and started thrusting my broomstick up in the branches on the Barreto side, but I could see there was nothing up there. The tree wasn't that tall. I didn't scare anything out. The dog started whining, then barking. He left us and walked back to the steps, sat there alternately whining and barking. Maria and I just looked at him.

"I'll go get the boys off to school," she said. She took the dog in the house with her.

When I got home from work that afternoon, the dog was outside again, and barking. My friend Ellen was coming over for dinner, and I needed to start cooking, but I thought I'd take a few minutes with the dog to try to calm him down. I didn't want him barking during dinner. I hurried to change clothes. The old shoes I'd worn the night before were covered with a dusty film from the rain. I'd seen that sort of thing plenty of times. See it once, and you'll never stick your tongue out in the rain again, like you can in the country. I brushed off the shoes and went for the dog.

"I walked him twice today — once in the rain," Maria said when she handed me the leash. "But maybe you can do something."

Lucky was glad to get out of the yard. He kept running ahead, pulling on the leash, then he'd suddenly stop and look back at me as if he were relieved to be away from his house, as if he wanted to say thanks. Dogs do things like that. They feel emotions, like relief, and — maybe because we're both mammals — we feel the same things, and we recognize similar emotions. Some say

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we just anthropomorphize the animals, but I don't think so. Lucky was relieved. I petted him when he'd stop to look at me. "It's all right, boy," I said. "We'll work this out of you."

I started running, and he darted out ahead of me, pulled on the leash for a while, then matched his speed to mine so we could run together. We ran east down Arapaho, north across Apache, then west back up Shoshone. I tried to dodge the puddles, and so would Lucky, usually, but sometimes he'd run right through them and splash us both. Good, I thought. The exercise should make him tired and calm him down.

The air stank, and I was surprised the rain hadn't cleaned the air. Life in the city, I thought. I started thinking maybe the guys who jogged around with breathing masks over their noses might be smart after all. Who knows what I was breathing into my lungs?

Three blocks along Shoshone, Lucky started to slow down.

And bark.

"Stop it, Lucky," I said.

He stopped and whined and would not go forward.

"Come on," I said, tugging on the leash. "We've got to get back."

He growled at me. I began to wonder if he were sick. "Lucky?" I said. I walked back to him. He didn't growl as long as I didn't try to make him go forward.

I looked around the neighborhood to see what could be making him act like that. But I couldn't see anything unusual or anything that could be connected with the Barretos' backyard.

Except the four cherry trees on the corner of Shoshone and Blackfoot, three houses down from us. The trees were in bloom, and the petals were falling around the trees, carpeting the grass. Was this dog upset by flowering trees? Allergies? He didn't seem stuffed up at all, or sick. Just on edge. Besides, how would a dog associate allergies with flowering trees? He wouldn't.

Still, I seemed to have no choice but to walk him away from the trees, east back down Shoshone. I turned south on Nez Percé so we could get back to Arapaho. There were cherries in bloom behind a greenhouse on our right, and Lucky whined when we walked past them, quickened his pace so we'd get by faster. He barked out loud at three pear trees planted in a row in front of a house across the street. When we got back to Arapaho, our street, and started toward our houses, he whined and barked and

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was shaking when I handed him over to Maria. I walked into my front yard and looked at the two plum trees I had planted there then, regular plums, not flowering ornamentals. They had been blooming and had been a mass of color for nearly a week. The grass around them was thick with fallen petals.

ELLEN GOT to my place around seven. I shook out her umbrella while she hung her coat in the hall closet. It had been raining again for nearly an hour, though now it was letting up. "What a night," she said.

She had rain misted on her chin and lips, and the water caught the light when she smiled.

"Your chin is red," I said, touching her.

"Cold," she said.

I got her a towel and watched her dry off, and wondered again why our relationship hadn't gone anywhere. We were just friends now — we'd tried dating, but it hadn't worked, and she was one of the few people who managed to stay in my life as a friend after something like that. I wanted the dinner to be nice for her.

"Baked Danish ham," I said. It was glazed and beautiful. I let it keep cooking on low heat in the oven while we sat down to eat the salads.

Ellen took hold of my hands. "They're all red," she said. "Have you been working outside?"

"No," I said. But I remembered poking around in the tree with the broom that morning, knocking rainwater on my hands. Ellen's chin was still red. I got up and looked at the broomstick in the laundry closet. It was covered with a dusty film like my shoes had been. I could rub it off with one finger.

"You'll have to put some lotion on your hands," she said.

Maybe more than that, I thought. I sat back down and told her about the rain, that maybe there was something in it. We were quiet for a time. Ellen touched her chin.

"What's that noise?" she asked.

"The dog next door? You remember Lucky —"

"No. The high-pitched whine. Did you have an alarm system put in here?"

Ellen could hear high-pitched sounds I could never hear, like the

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whine of alarm systems in department stores. The clerks said a few people, especially children with their good ears, sometimes commented on the sound. Ellen wasn't the only one. A year ago, she'd insisted on having her desk at the paper moved farther away from the water fountain because it emitted a high-pitched whine no one else could hear, but which bothered her.

"No alarm," I said.

"What's on?" she asked, looking around the kitchen.

"I left the oven on low heat," I said. I got up and turned it off.

"I still hear it," she said. "It's faint. Could it be from outside?"

She got up and looked out the kitchen window.

"Come outside with me," I said. "I wonder if you'll hear this sound under the plum tree."

I found us both hats to wear, and we kept our hands in our pockets. The sky was just dripping now. Occasional raindrops hit our hats when we walked outside; that's all. We walked back under the plum, getting our shoes wet. Lucky was whining on the Barretos' back steps, and he ran toward us when he saw us walk out, then he pawed at the fence. I reached over and petted him.

"The sound is louder here," she said. "Much worse. Can't you hear it?"

I shook my head. "But this dog's been going crazy since last night," I said. "Barking and whining at this tree."

"It's no wonder," she said. "The sound would drive me crazy. It fluctuates a little, but it's pretty constant."

"So what's up there?"

She was looking at the tree. "No one spot emits the sound," she said. "It's as if the whole tree is resonating."

I had her walk out in my front yard.

"Your plum trees are doing it, too," she said.

I tried putting on music to drown out the sound, but that didn't work. I could tell the sound still bothered Ellen, so we abandoned dinner at my place and drove to a little Vietnamese restaurant in a shopping mall a mile from my house — with asphalt parking lots between us and most trees. Ellen couldn't hear a whine inside the restaurant. But she called me later from her apartment to tell me she could hear dogs barking down the street near Liberty Park, which had apricots and cherries and plums in flower.

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I walked back outside, not under the plum trees where rainwater might drip on me, but near them, and tried to hear their resonations. I couldn't. But I could hear Lucky trying to bark, though he was mostly hoarse now. There were dogs barking down the street past the Andersons', and some big dog with a deep voice barking two or three streets south.

That night, I lay in bed and listened to dogs barking all over the city.

In the morning, all the petals had fallen from my fruit trees. By night, when I got home from work, the leaves had started to fall. Ellen called to say that she had gone for a walk in the park at noon, and that the fruit trees were resonating there, too, and dying. The leaves were falling off them.

I changed clothes, and Edwardo and I wore hats and gloves and took Lucky out for a walk. The dog didn't want to run, just walk. His paws seemed to hurt him, and I tried to steer him away from the puddles of water. He seemed exhausted, though calmer. And maybe with reason, I thought. The sound might have lessened. All the fruit trees down Arapaho and back up Shoshone had lost their petals and were losing their leaves.

Maria kept Lucky in her house, and he lost whole patches of fur. The boys tried to brush him at first, but his skin was tender and it hurt him, so they just let him shed. The sound was over by then. We were right about the rain, that it had caused the rashes on our skin, and Lucky's shedding, and more. The rashes, at least, soon cleared up. All the news in the papers and on TV was about the new compounds in the rain, a result of many things — loosened regulations on emissions from cars; dust blown in from the National Toxic Dumping Grounds in the west desert; pollution from the Geneva steel mill in the next valley over; and possibly the resumption of poison-gas testing at Dugway Proving Grounds, though the media could never fully confirm the rumors of that connection. The compounds killed seventy-four thousand trees in Salt Lake in a matter of weeks, including most of the fruit trees. They stood without leaves all around us and made it look as though a new winter were coming, not spring.

"And I heard it," Ellen said to me when we went walking in the park past all the dead trees, crunching dry leaves under our feet in late April. "I heard the sound the trees made when they died."

And the dogs had heard it.

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You think you understand the world. You think things work in certain ways, that they do only certain things. Then the trees make noise when we kill them with toxic compounds. It was the chemical reaction, the news said. The sound was a result of the chemical reaction going on inside the trees, the reaction that killed them.

I chopped down the plum trees in my yard and in the Barretos', had them hauled away. Maria and I didn't burn the wood, like some people did. We didn't want to risk breathing in whatever might have been in the smoke.

I washed my car every day after I knew what was happening, but the paint still faded in places. The whole neighborhood got out hoses, and we sprayed down our houses, but we were too late there, too. Most of the houses ended up with yellow spots all over them, and we had to repaint later in the summer, after the rain stopped.

And I didn't plant fruit trees back in the front yard. I planted junipers, a hardy desert tree that had stood up under the new rain, at least for now. New antipollution regulations had stopped the problem, we were told. It would be safe to plant fruit trees again. It wouldn't happen again in Utah. But I wondered. So I stopped trying to grow fruit myself, decided to buy it instead from the country, where I hoped it would be cleaner away from the city, where I hoped the world still worked like it had when I was a boy, and the trees didn't cry out before dying.

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Michael F. Flynn wins the unusual title award for this issue. "Timothy Leary, Batu Khan, and the Palimpsest of Universal Reality" marks Mike's first appearance in F&SF. Strange titles seem to be his forte, especially for the dozens of stories he has published in Analog. *His novel titles are tamer:* In the Country of the Blind, *his first novel, won the Compton Crook Award, the Prometheus Award, and the Locus Award. His second novel,* Fallen Angels, *was a collaboration with Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. His most recent book,* The Nanotech Chronicles, *is a story mosaic set in a common fictional context. Baen published all three of his books.*

Timothy Leary, Batu Khan, and the Palimpsest of Universal Reality

By Michael F. Flynn

I

A COHORT OF ROMAN legionnaires rounded up the incoming passengers at the Place de la Concorde Métro station and marched them off to be sold into slavery. They looked pretty down about it, the passengers did; and I can't say I blamed them. The outbound passengers waiting on the platform pretended to read their newspapers, or scrolls or thinscreens. The old Babylonian sitting next to me hunched over his mud tablet, poking at it furiously with a stiff reed. We ignored the Romans and the Romans ignored us. Don't ask me why; something to do with entrails. The Romans didn't have the guts.

I didn't know when the Romans had come from or when they planned to go, but I did know that their plans were about to go agley. Batu Khan and an *ordu* of Mongol horsemen were waiting for them aboveground on the

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Champs Élysées. They would make short work of the Romans, turtle or no turtle; and short work of the Métro passengers, as well. Batu had no use for male prisoners or for children; and his attitude was why sell women for money when you could use them yourself for free. Batu never said, but I think he regarded the Romans as anal-retentives.

Paris-1923 was royally fucked up and I was ready to split. I couldn't find Papa or Fitz or Daisy. In fact, I couldn't find any of the Lost Generation, which I suppose makes sense. Batu was making things pretty hairy and they were due to get hairier still, and not because the Romans had shown up. I heard it through the grapevine that Marie Curie had slipped radium into Batu's koumiss after he raped her, so the ka-khan's innards were being machined-gunned by nanobullets. I did not want to be in Paris23 when he caught on.

There was a sudden shout from aboveground and a rattle like hailstones on a wooden roof — Mongol arrows hitting Roman shields. The Babylonian paused and almost looked at me, then began poking his mud even more furiously. I hoped he wasn't planning to mail his "say-to-them" — that's what Babylonians call their "letters." Mud is heavy and mailing bricks has never been cost-effective. But then folks from that far up in the backtimes have never adjusted well to the downstream eras. I knew a fellow from Lagash — Gilga-something or other — who invented a cuneiform typewriter by gluing reed tips to the strikers of an 1890 Smith-Corona. He'd been fairly adaptable as Mesopotamians go, but then he went and poured mud in the platen, so things never quite worked the way he figured.

A rumble and a rattle and a hiss of air brakes announced the next train. When the conductor stepped onto the platform and bawled, "Chicago-1965! This is a CTA train! Chicago65!," I hopped aboard. Melinda had always liked Chicago and sometimes hung out in Old Town in the '60s.

The train jerked away from the platform, built up speed and rolled into the tunnel. Five hundred yards down the track, the onboard scooters kicked in and we came out on the El just west of the Loop. I could see the Wrigley Building and the luxury apartments along the Gold Coast framed against the sparkling Lake. The wind was off the stockyards, where Charlie Goodnight had just bedded down a trail herd of 1873 Texas longhorns. I took a deep breath and exhaled. Chicago. My kind of town.

* * *

Time scooting did not stay secret for very long. Some people say that

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Russian soldiers sent back to "correct" the Afghan war bartered their scooters for vodka. Others say that an American time-tour company set up franchises without properly screening the local managers. Who knows? With the way time has been screwed up, both stories are probably true. It doesn't matter. In fact, from a certain point of view scooting never was a secret. I mean, how long do you keep a secret if it's revealed a century before it was made? To top it off, scooters were too easy to duplicate. People slapped themselves on the forehead afterward and said, of course, so obvious. So, the word got out and, what with outright theft and the blatant violation of patent laws, pretty soon everybody and his grandmother was time scooting.

I still don't know when my grandmother is.

At first, folks worried about altering the past. They wanted to pass laws and set up Historical Preservation Districts. Then there were folks who wondered about altering the past. *They* thought it might not be such a bad idea. Finally, there were folks who went out and did it. The way I heard it, a crew of AIM Indians from 1969 scooted back to MidAtlantic- 1492 with three torpedoes and a wing of Hornets they snatched from Pearl Harbor during the confusion. At least, that's what Russ Means told me, and he was there. But when they finally located Columbus's fleet, they were chased off by elements of the Italian Air Force firing Sidewinder missiles.

What some folks won't do to keep a paid holiday.

It turned out that time was both mutable and cumulative. Columbus was sunk *and* Columbus was saved *and* Columbus sailed on without incident. When you changed the past, you left all the previous versions intact, so they all happened "simultaneously." Sure, Batu Khan was ravaging Paris-1923; but he was also invading Poland-1230 and — someone once told me — making a good living as a performance artist in New York-1989. It all depends on where his head was at when he first got hold of a time scooter.

I've read all the usual articles about "Schrödinger's cat escaping" and "the wave function expanding into a universal reality" instead of collapsing onto a single version, but I never understood more than one word in three; and Geoff, who might have explained it, is out "bodysurfing on the Dirac Sea," as he put it. I suppose "layered" time would be a better term than

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"cumulative." Realities were superimposed, the way scribes superimposed manuscripts on the same parchment, covering up the older writings so they could reuse the sheet. Palimpsests, they were called. If you looked hard enough, you could still read the earlier documents

Now everyone could have the history they always wanted and always knew they deserved. Malcolm X had highjacked a submarine and was keeping station off El Mina fortress in the 1600s. He sank twenty-five incoming slave ships before the Confederates organized an airlift. A half dozen Fenians from 1865 had ambushed Strongbow as he stepped ashore at Waterford-1176, until Ian Paisley and some R.I.C. renegades scooted back from 1973 in an armored personnel carrier. I've lost count of how many people were hiding behind that grassy knoll in Dallas. One time, Oswald (yes, Oswald) missed JFK and hit Oliver Stone, but that's what the fool gets for setting up his cameras where he did.

That was one reason I gave up teaching. History texts were as big as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. And how can you grade the exam when the kids just check "all the above"?

* * *

I hopped off the train at Chicago and State and strolled through Old Town. Things were half-familiar, half-different; the way it always is when you loop back to an old scene. The way I remember '65, the hippie thing had barely begun, and long hair and love beads still got funny looks. But then, the '60s never really got started until they were already halfway over. Most folks had their '60s in the '70s.

Now they could have their '60s anytime they wanted. Old Town was as crowded as Times Square on New Year's Eve. Paisley and bell-bottoms were everywhere and the scent of sandalwood wafted from the open doors of a dozen head shops. Someone with an acoustic guitar was singing "When Have All the Flowers Gone?" The Haight is the same way, and the Village, too, but in different years.

Everybody was hanging out. The wannabes and the ustabes and the alwaysbes. I saw rich kids pretending to be poor in expensive, designer dress-downs. I saw older hippie retreads, looking funny without their three-piece suits and power ties. I saw *ur*-hippies from the 1820s and 1890s. And aboriginal hippies — easy to spot because of the disconcerted look. It's hard to be a nonconformist when *everyone* is dressing like you. I even saw myself once, crossing with the light at Dearborn; but myself didn't see me

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and, since I seemed to be in a hurry, I didn't say anything.

Ed Poe and Dory Duncan were sharing a toke in front of the Water Tower and I stopped and rapped with them for a while. Ed told me how he had seen Elvis shopping in Marshall Fields; but, hell, The King was one of the first to get ahold of a scooter and folks had been spotting him here and there for a long time. Dory copped a feel on me, which I pretended not to notice, since I had other things on my mind. Still, it's always nice to get the invitations, so I R.S.V.P.'d before I split.

At Bughouse Square, I ran into a few people I knew from 1965 the first time around waving "End the War Now" signs. Sixty-five was still a little early for that; and the protesters seemed uneasy because Vietnamese boat people from the '70s and '80s were counterpicketing.

When I reached Division Street, I scooted down to '69 and into Butch McGuire's for a brew.

I thought Melinda might be there today because she and I had been there today, but you never can tell anymore. All the barstools were taken, so I backpedaled a few minutes until I found an empty one, then planted my ass on it, preempting whoever had been there originally. A few minutes later I came into the bar looking for a seat, but I didn't get up. Let me find my own seat, like I did. "Draw one," I told the bartender, which was how you got a draft in Chicago in those days. Never tried to dodge *that* draft.

Butch's was still mostly the way I remembered: Big plate-glass windows facing the street, so you could take in the scene and the scene could take in you. Wooden floor. Basketball hoops on the wall for the sports crowd. Butch's was on the edge of Old Town and had always been more a singles scene than counterculture, but some of us hung out there, anyway.

Or we used to.

Melly and I weren't sitting in the back booth the way we had been. I didn't see us at the bar, either. I checked the wall calendar and the clock and it was the right date and the right time, but there wasn't a trace of us anywhere in the scene. I frowned and took a pull of my Pabst. That had been happening all too often, lately.

Today is/was/had been/ will be our counterculture engagement anniversary; the day when Melly had finally said I could move in with her. (That's all a bourgeois engagement is, really. The only difference is how long you have to wait before you pack your suitcase. And the hassle you have to go through when you repack your suitcase later on.) Melly and I

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didn't believe in that Establishment crap: no ceremonies, no ministers, no pieces of paper. All those tight-ass obsessions with what was "proper." If it felt right, do it. The '60s were great for guys: nookie without commitment. And you could lay guilt trips on girls who hung on to unliberated, bourgeois values. Not that that was the case with Melly and me. I meant every word I told her at the time. Our love was going to last forever.

Sometimes forever doesn't last that long. I lowered my eyes and scowled at my beer. Damn the mutability of time, anyway. Worse than forgetting an anniversary was when the anniversary forgot you.

Times had changed. It was a hard-bitten bunch bellied up to the bar, a different crowd than the mellow folks I remembered. Increase Mather was putting them away on my left; and Bill Hickok was soaking up red-eye on my right. We gave each other polite nods, but none of us said anything. Here and there around the place I spotted Ethan Allen, George Patton, Mike Tyson, and the gal who called herself "Baby Q," all of them the younger, wilder versions. The Brat Pack. "Iron Mike" and "Wild Bill" were visibly armed and "Blood and Guts" usually wore a hideaway. I wondered if Allen's street gang, the "Green Mountain Boys," were nearby. I began to feel uncomfortable. *Definitely* the wrong crowd for Chicago69.

You know the crowd I mean. Your kids, my kids, our younger brothers and sisters. Left to grow up by themselves because their parents were too busy with Woodstock or Walden Pond or the Great Awakening to pay them much mind. Or the parents were working two jobs, or there'd only been one parent (except for Baby Q, who'd had three). So, they all grew up too fast, street-smart and cynical, with chips on their shoulders and their eyes on the main chance. "We were suckled on darkness and weaned on noise," Tom Wolfe had confessed to me just before he hooked a scooter and went home again. If there'd been latchkeys around in Puritan Massachusetts, Increase Mather would've been a latchkey kid, too.

I finished my beer and pushed away. The Brat Pack has never much liked my generations, either. They disrupted Altamont right off the bat, and tried twice to bust up Woodstock. A half dozen of them drove through Walden Pond on dirt bikes. I'd even heard that they'd once taken out the *Arabella* with a Stinger, but who can keep up with history these days? If we detested their recklessness and lack of ideals, they were tired of hearing about the communal love and commitment at Woodstock and Walden Pond and Plymouth Rock. Maybe because they knew what had come of it.

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We had seen the City on a Hill; they had seen witch trials and hangings. We had seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord; they had seen Shiloh and Antietam. We had seen the Summer of Love; they had seen the pc trials and the Crisis of 2017.

But I will give them this much: When the chips were down and it was fighting time — whether it was 2017 or 1689 . . . Or '75, '61 or '42. When it was "root, hog or die," they did what they had to do, with cool competence and no complaints and never asked or expected any thanks.

But that was their older, pragmatic selves, not the angry, reckless gang getting drunk in Butch McGuire's. I paid my tab and left in a hurry.

Stepping outside, I ran smack into Timothy Learies. I knew Tim from my own '60s, the first time around. We'd hung out together during the Summer of Love at Woodstock. He'd tuned into the era so well that he changed his name to that of his idol and kept looping back and looping back. There were never less than a dozen of him and they all hung out together, which made for quite a sight around Old Town or the Haight. Have you ever wondered why Woodstock was so crowded? Each time I go back there the crowd gets bigger.

I picked out a version who looked about the right age to know/remember me. "Hey, Tim," I said, "What's happening, man?"

They looked me over and I saw that about half of him were tripping and two from farther downtime were wearing virtual-reality helmets. The others were baby-sitting. One of him squinted into my face, so close I could see the bloodshot and smell the weed on his breath. "Hey, Jack-o! Heavy. What's happening, man?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. By sheer good luck I had picked a version of him that shared a reality with me. I tried not to remember the time in Berkeley73 that the cops had me identify his body. Tim had done a lot of drugs, and his quality control had never been any too good. One time at a party he will pop down a couple of pills he discovers on a dresser-top. When I ask him why, he says, "Hey, they might be dope."

Of course, I didn't always have to identify his body in '73. Sometimes things worked out. Life was a crapshoot.

"You look old, Jack-o," he said. "You over thirty now?"

I'd been thinking the same of him; but that's the funny thing. We never look old to ourselves. I pointed to his entourage. "Some of you look old, too."

"Yeah. Well." He grinned. "Sometimes I don't trust me, either."

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We laughed and rapped over some old times and some remember-whens. Tim didn't have to remember that shit, because he kept looping through it. When he reached the end of the '60s, he usually scooted back to the beginning. I told him how rotten and materialistic the '80s had gotten, but he gave me a blank look; so I shut up knowing that this version would never reach the '80s. Berkeley73 drew Tim in like a strange attractor. Even when he *knew*, he went.

He ran a hand through his beard. "So, like, how's Melly these days?"

Which days? You could pick and choose now. So why not pick the good ones and let the others go? "We broke up awhile back, and I've been looking for her. Have you seen her anywhen around?"

Three of him scratched his head. Two others tugged on his beard. "Lessee . . . Melly, Melly, Melly, Melly. Belly, chili, deli, filly. . . .Filly! That's it, man."

"Filly?"

"Filly-Melly. Yeah, man. At an SDS meeting. Philly72, pee-ay. You pee."

Over the years, Tim had dropped more acid than the Conrail spill of '97. When he shook his head, you could hear castanets. He meant U.P., the University of Pennsylvania. Melly and I had drifted apart during her radical days in Philadelphia. She had become more intense, more ragged around the edges, while I had floated toward the Yippie end of the spectrum. Propaganda of the Deed versus Propaganda of the Prank. Up the Revolution through Theater. I gave one of the seconding speeches nominating that pig for president. I helped stage a mock counterparade when the Artillery ROTC marched down Germantown Avenue on Saint Barbara's Day. I used to call Melinda up and talk to her in Russian. *Zdrasti', tovarishch. Kak tiy poshevayesh*? Drove her crazy. She thought the FBI was tapping her phone and the last thing she wanted was Russian voices on the line. The whole Revolution scene was a real gas, and I found it hard to keep a straight face all during the early '70s. If we had thrown more water balloons and fewer bombs, the Establishment might have toppled altogether.

I grabbed Tim's sleeve. "Have you seen her anyplace else?" I wanted to stay away from the bombs-and-radicals scene if I could. There was too much other shit going down. Melly had been perpetually angry in those days. At LBJ, at me, at Rizzo, at the pizzas from Frank's. Not a well-focused anger, but sincerely felt.

Tim defocused and looked at a spot three feet behind my head and on

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another plane of reality. "Anyplace else? Nooooooo . . . . but I did see her *some*place else." He grinned as if he had said something funny, sobered instantly and gave me a bug-eyed, Bozo-the-Clown look. "Milwaukee71, Jack-o. Foo."

I was starting to lose patience. "Sure, Tim. But '71 is a big year. Can't you pin it down better than that?"

He flashed me a look at once both irritated and distracted and I knew his attention span had just about been used up. "I told you, Jack-o. Someplace else." He tugged his sleeve from my grip and the whole crowd of him wandered off down the street.

When I turned about-face, I almost collided with Peggy Fuller. She was dressed in bloomers, like most of the 1820s crowd, and she had a stack of pamphlets under her arm.

"Hey, Peggy," I said. "Long times, no see. How are the Seventy Speakers doing?"

She gave me a double take as she pressed a leaflet into another pedestrian's grip. "Why, Jack! How very good to see you. What is happening?" The pedestrian glanced at the leaflet, balled it up and dropped it in the gutter as he rushed by. "Do you plan to attend our Rally?" She handed me one of her leaflets.

"Rally? What rally?" There was always a rally going on somewhen. We were never happier than when planning one, or issuing Manifestos, or marching for a Cause. Peggy's pamphlet urged "Feminists of all Ages" (and you could take that two ways) to come to Washington 81 to help pass the E.R.A. "I thought it did get passed." The way I remembered it, the E.R.A. had failed for three loops; then it had passed, failed again, then passed four loops in a row. I shrugged. Maybe times had changed. "What's your plan?"

"R&R," she said. "Residence and Registration. Betty Friedan and Suzy B. and I organized it. We shall scoot all about your '70s and early '80s, take up residence in as many states and years as we are able, and register for the vote. When we suffragettes, I mean, we feminists have a majority, we shall elect legislators who will vote favorably on the Amendment."

"Sounds great," I said, though I had my doubts. Since Sue Anthony was antiabortion, she didn't get along with some of her Sisters and a lot of their plans fell apart in bickering.

But that's the way it is with idols. We remember them for one thing and forget that they believed — and did — other things as well. That you and

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I agree on something doesn't mean we agree on everything. Or even that we agree for the same reasons. There have been more than a few fiascoes. When NOW scooted Margaret Sanger downtime for a keynote speech on birth control, they discovered that she was a eugenicist whose objective was to "improve the race." And Henry Ford started a near-riot at the Chamber of Commerce meeting, reading anti-Semitic diatribes from the *Dearborn Independent*. Both Kennedy and King were slapped with sexual-harassment suits at the 1996 Convention. Folks think twice now before inviting their heroes home for supper.

It works the other way, too. Hitler was an animal-rights advocate who put through the world's first antivivisection laws. So what? The Communists were right when they condemned the Cult of Personality, even if they didn't practice it all that well. It's the deed we should admire, not the person. People are mixed bags. A little bit of good and a little bit of bad, all rolled up together inside one skin, and it's all a matter of luck what you get each time you reach inside.

Hey, Jude, that's why you have to keep reaching.

"Going to be any guys at the Rally?" I asked Peg.

"Of course, sir. As I have always said, 'There is no purely masculine man. . . .'"

"'And no purely feminine woman,'" I finished for her. She was right, too. If an Irish father makes me half-Irish, what does a female mother make me? It was funny how the writings of the 1820s resonated so strongly with my generation. A lot of the 1820s radicals liked to hang out in the '60s, and vice versa. I'd spent time back there myself, mostly with Emerson's crowd in Concord and with Hawthorne and the rest at Brook Farm. The guys at the Brook Farm commune parted their hair in the middle and let it fall to their shoulders, and their elders grumbled how they "dressed in garments such as no human being had worn before." They thought they would save the world, too; so we '60s types fit right in. Nehru jackets and love beads went like hotcakes in Concord-1823.

"Shall you attend, then?" Peg asked.

I considered it. Melinda would certainly be at the rally, but what were the chances of finding her in such a crowd?" I'd like to be there," I said. In fact, I probably was there. Who knows? "But not on this loop. I'm looking for Melinda, and the Timothy Learies told me that he had seen her in Milwaukee71."

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"Well, good fortune to you then, Jack. Give Melly my warmest regards and I look forward to seeing both of you at the Rally."

I started to reply, but we were interrupted by Bill Hickok leaving Butch McGuire's. The hard way. He crashed through the plate-glass window, hit the sidewalk, and rolled to a stop at my feet. I gave him a hand up and he gave me a squint-eyed look, but then he decided I was no part of the fight. "Mighty obliged there, Jack," he said. Then he whipped off his hat and brushed the glass off. "Sure am powerful glad they switched over to that Hollywood breakaway stuff," he said. "Ever go through a real glass window?"

"No, I surely did not, Wild Bill. Who gave you the black eye?"

He laughed. "Nobody *give* it to me, hoss. I had to fight for it." McGuire's shook with shouts and grunts and the sound of splintered furniture. Hickok grinned and hitched up his pants. He looked both ways up Division Street, then put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. "George!" he shouted. "Horse!" He hooked his arm. "We got it to do!"

George Custer and Crazy Horse had stumbled out of a dive farther down the street, arm in arm and sharing a bottle. When Hickok called them, they both took a last swig and Horse broke the bottom of the bottle off against the nearest wall. Hickok turned. "See you 'round, Jack. . . ." He tipped his hat to Peg. ". . . Ma'am. As the three of them started back into McGuire's, Mike Tyson sailed through the broken window and I wondered when the next bus was leaving for Milwaukee71. Someone in that bar had thrown Wild Bill *and* Iron Mike out the window. I did not want to meet this person.

As I headed off toward Rush Street, a raiding party of Winnebago Indians scooted in right in the center lane of Division Street. They hadn't even counted a single coup before they were creamed by one of those big camper-vans. I shuddered at the bad karma and hoped they wouldn't make the same mistake the next time they looped. The noise from Butch's grew louder behind me. War whoops and gunshots. I shook my head. The '60s sure weren't what they used to be.

* * *

The Bus to Milwaukee 71 was a local and stopped in Racine68 and a dozen other space-times along the way. When we finally reached the terminal I felt like toejam and navel lint; but after a quick stop in the washroom to splash cold water on my face, I picked up my duffel bag and headed for Someplace Else.

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Someplace Else was one of the bars on "The Milwaukee Circuit." There was Someplace Else and The Stone Toad and Uncle Dirty's and Crazy Horse. (Someone tried to open up a bar called Uncle Crazy's Dirty Horse, but lawyers have no sense of humor.) Seeing Crazy Horse himself back in Chicago69 had made me realize what Tim had been trying to tell me.

The 'Place was packed shoulder to shoulder. If someone died, the corpse wouldn't even keel over until closing time. Every now and then the body-pack rippled as some asshole scooted in. Good manners said you scooted outside the door and walked in, so folks wouldn't be jostled when your singularity expanded. The floor was sprinkled with sawdust and the tables were well stocked with peanuts. I grabbed a handful of nuts and waited for Brownian motion to carry me close enough to the bar to order a beer.

I searched the nearby faces for Melinda, but didn't see her. By standing tiptoe I could see over the crowd — I'm taller than most — but that didn't help because all I could see were the tops of other people's heads, which all look pretty much the same. Especially in '71. I did notice one skinhead, though, and wondered what he was doing here-and-now. Away off in a corner booth I spotted Mike and Margie holding hands across the table. Margie was in her puppy-ear period and was the owner of the prettiest smile on the face of the planet. I thought about squeezing over to say hello; but they didn't look like they needed company and they did look too young. Not only wouldn't Mike know me yet; he wouldn't even have started writing this story. But I better not get into *that*, or Russell's paradox will screw the plot up worse than it already is.

Push, shove, squeeze. This whole scene was starting to get me down. I couldn't find Melly anywhen. I couldn't find anyone who might know when Melly was. I couldn't even find a beer. I decided the hell with it and scooted backtime and across town a few months to Pepperland.

* * *

In those days, communes were scattered all over the North Side between the River and the Core, though mostly they clustered near the Universities. Some were religious, full of Jesuits and hip, post–Vatican II Catholic students. Others were political, held together by the radical, antiwar agendas of wannabe Maoists and Trotskyites. Still others were social, based on the notion that communal life was morally superior to bourgeois individualism.

Pepperland was based on the notion that communal life was *cheaper*

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than bourgeois individualism. Split the rent of a run-down, soon-to-be condemned, unfurnished building and you might as well be living for free. We all chipped in to buy the appliances and furniture. Members who left sold their shares back at a discount; new members bought shares at face value. Some of our friends said we were capitalists, because we bought and sold the shares. Others said we were Communists, because we owned our capital in common. What we were was cheap.

By the time I hit Milwaukee71 the first time around, I was burned out on the radical scene, anyway. It was one thing to march and protest and stand up for your beliefs; it was something else to plant bombs, rob banks and kill people. Even the Beatles sang, ". . . you can count me out. . . ." But by then, the Fab Four were so wealthy that the idea of a genuine revolution must have given them serious second thoughts.

II

WHEN I walked in the front door at Pepperland, I found the gang passed out on the floor amid empty bottles of Vino Profundo. Vino Profundo was the kind of wine you bought in drums with the vintage time-stamped on the labels. The lava lamp in the corner was still bubbling and the stereo was playing *Abbey Road.* I started humming along. "She came in through the bathroom window. . . ." Burnt-out joss sticks jutted from the pots and planters, and a pile of ash marked where an incense cone had sat before a plaster Buddha statue. The odor of weed hung in the air. Neal's uncle had a farm up in New England someplace and planted ten acres in Vermont Vermilion. Sometimes we blew grass for breakfast. Snap, crackle, pop, and plenty of fiber. And it made the lecture classes oh-so-much more interesting.

I counted heads. There was Neal, Ginny, Pops, Big Z, Banjo Billy, Suzee and Fred the Red. Fred was the Compleat Revolutionary. Everything was "fascist," including the tree that jumped out into the road and hit his car. If he had spent some time in Mussolini's Italy, he would have found out what the true quill was like; but a trip to the 1990s to "witness the triumph of the Revolution" had turned him off time scooting for good. He was never much fun after that. Some people just can't resist reading the last chapter of a mystery book, either.

All the right faces, but I came out two short. No Melly. No me. Which

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bothered me, since I distinctly remembered passing out with the others that night. Neal groaned and moved, holding his head together with both hands. "Who's breathing so loud?" The others remained comatose.

I could see I wasn't going to get many answers from this crowd and I contemplated scooting one way or the other. But backtime, they'd be partying; and downtime, they'd be hung over. I postponed decision by wandering through the house and checking the other rooms. It could be that Melly and I had already gone off to her room, because I did remember waking up the next morning in her bed for the first time.

Her darkened, second-floor room was lit only by the fluorescent afterglow of two hundred psychedelic Peter Max posters. The lingering scents of sandalwood, weed and woman hung in the air. I took a deep, relaxing breath. The scene was right. Just the way I remembered it. The Nixon dartboard. Clothes thrown over the back of an old dinette chair. The battered stereo. The bed was a mattress laid on the floor. No box springs, no frame; just two slumbering bodies side by side. I checked the LP covers. The Stones' *Satanic Majesty* . . . the Doors . . . Janis . . . the White Album, with the songs that made no sense at all unless you were stoned. Nothing from downtime. No CD's.

I felt a stir of excitement. Maybe, just maybe, I had slip-slid onto the bottom layer of the palimpsest. The original version. The real one. There were Melly's posters on the wall, Melly's clothes on the chair, Melly's records on the floor; and, most important of all, Melly's bod on the bed.

Maybe I should have come here first, after all. But she and I had vanished from so many of our old haunts and landmarks that I had been afraid to try. The last time I visited Pepperland, Melly had not even been a member and half the other communards had been strangers to me.

At her bedside, I hesitated for just an instant — for all I really knew that was Batu Khan in bed with her, not me — then I crouched down for a better look at her face. Young, unblemished, twentysomething, waist-long crimson hair fanned like a blush across the sheets, the soft edges of the eyes and mouth.

This was the best Melly, the one I always remember. The early Melly; the first Melly. Not the cynical, angry Melly farther down the timestream, but one who had the commitment without the hardness. First time around, I hadn't known her at all before coming to Pepperland. It wasn't until later that we met earlier. As for the Melinda farther downstream, the less said,

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the better.

I must have done something or made some noise because Melly's eyes flew suddenly open. She looked straight at me, and she screamed.

I held my hands up, palms out. "Quiet, Melly, please. You'll wake me up." If it was me, and I hoped to hell it wasn't Batu. "It's me. Jack."

"Who are you?" she said, pulling the sheets tight up around her throat. "Linda, help!"

The figure beside her stirred and rolled over and sat up and it wasn't me and it wasn't Batu Khan. It wasn't even Wild Bill Hickok.

It was Melinda.

I looked at her and she looked at me. Then she laid a hand on Melly's shoulder. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll take care of this. I won't let him hurt you."

"Melinda, you know I wouldn't hurt her."

"Do I? Do you suppose I've forgotten?"

That's when I realized that I was talking to the thirtysomething Melinda. The '80s Melinda. The hair-bobbed-short, granite-eyed, ice-hearted bitch Melinda. I hadn't been looking for her; not at all. "What are you doing here?" I asked bitterly. Melinda always managed to ruin everything. Even dreams. Especially dreams.

But that's the way life is. One minute, you're laughing; the next, you're all twisted up.

"A girl has to look after herself," she said. She threw aside the sheets and rolled to her feet; stood up and stretched. She was bare-assed naked, and I caught enough of a glimpse of Melly to see that she was, too.

"Oh," I said. "So it's like that, is it?"

She stood with her left hand resting against her hip. Not flaunting her body; but not hiding it, either. A calculated nonchalance. . . . "Is it any of your business?"

I couldn't keep my eyes off her. "Yes, damn it. Whatever went wrong, that was between you and me. It doesn't affect her." I gestured toward the younger woman watching doe-eyed from the bed.

"Doesn't it? Are you too stupid to remember, or too dishonest?"

"I explained. Or I tried to. I scooted back — the whole reason I took up scooting was to try and make things right between us. But you wouldn't listen. Or you couldn't listen."

"Or I shouldn't listen." She walked to the chair where the clothing hung

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and picked up a bra. Her every movement was graceful, lithe. She held the bra carelessly running it from hand to hand. She knew what the sight of her did to me: those small, high breasts; smooth, supple, t'ai chi–hardened muscles; rounded abdomen. I had roamed that landscape many times; had been into that country, explored its every hill and crevasse. I knew it and longed for it the way a Jew longs for Jerusalem. I was her junkie and she was my fix.

And she, damn it, she knew that. Glancing at me just long enough and just low enough to be sure she'd had the desired effect, she began to dress; slowly, like a striptease run backward and somehow for that reason all the more provocative. Careless of the effect on me, she arched herself to fasten the bra in place. She wriggled her way into her panties; thrust herself into her jeans. By the time she had fastened the last button on her blouse, I was one synapse away from reversing the whole process.

Which was what she expected me to do. What she wanted me to do.

Because what the hell use was a black belt if you didn't get to kick some balls now and then?

She hesitated with her finger toying with the last button. "Why don't you scoot? Hit the road, Jack. There's nothing here for you. Not anymore."

A nod toward the bed. "There's Melly."

She shook her head. "You'll never have a chance with her. I've made sure of that."

Cold. To twist your own life like that. . . .Worse than using another person was using yourself. "I loved you once, Melinda."

"No, you didn't."

"We had great times together."

"No, we didn't."

"Sure, we did. Remember the beer run that time Neal threw his big party?" We had driven over to the liquor store about eleven at night and Melly had played with the stick shift all the way over. Except the car was an automatic and didn't have a stick shift. So, when we found the shopping center closed, we pulled over to a dark corner of the parking lot, and we —

"It never happened, Jack. I made it never happen."

"You're wrong. I remember it. I think about it a lot."

"You would."

"And . . . another time. On the Appalachian Trail. You led me off the trail behind some bushes and spread a blanket and we had to be real quiet

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because there were other hikers around and if anyone had peeked behind the bushes."

She tossed her head, and her short-bobbed hair barely moved, though I had a vision of a swirling cape of red. "You only remember getting laid."

"It was good. You remember things that were good."

"Good for you."

"For you, too. You told me so, often enough."

"I lied. I'm a terrible liar. There have been only 437 genuine vaginal orgasms in the history of the human race. All the others were faked." She crossed her arms. "Remember something else," she challenged me. "Did my body have any other organs?"

Two wonderfully symmetric and perfectly formed breasts. But, no. NEVER say the first thing that pops into your head. *Your mouth; your tongue. Your....* "Convictions," I told her. "Deep, political convictions. We marched on the Pentagon together in '68." I remembered the line of soldiers facing us with their gas masks and rifles and how we prayed that some asshole farther back in the crowd wouldn't throw a rock. I hadn't known then that the soldiers had not been issued ammunition and were more scared of us than we were of them. There were more of us, a *lot* more. A few years downtime, one of the soldiers is my boss. Life is funny.

"You and me and a couple ten thousand others," said Melinda. "Tell me something a little more personal that we shared." She spoke in a cool, detached sort of way. Interested, but in an academic fashion, like a historian discussing ancient ruins and monuments.

"We listened to the same music. The Stones. Sly. Chicago."

"Everyone listened to the same music."

"Jesus, you're hard, Melinda."

"And you're not anymore, poor baby."

That was true. I was as limp as Nixon's explanations. She could suck it right out of you when she was like this. It seemed to give her strength. Women are vampires at heart. "I meant callous."

"Oh, and you're the sensitive one?"

"You're the one who won't listen. You're the one who is trying to rip our past out by the roots."

"You'd pull weeds out of a garden, wouldn't you? It's my life, Jack. I make my own future and, if I have to, I'll make my own past, too. I've taken charge of my life, my *whole* life; and you can't stand that."

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I turned my head and saw that Melly was sitting on the bed with her knees drawn up under her chin, listening to every word. "I'm not as bad as she says," I told her. "People change sometimes. They grow bitter."

Melly shrugged. A small movement of her shoulders. She didn't care one way or the other. She had never met me. I was a stranger, and my troubles didn't touch her. That hurt. I would rather that she'd hated me than shown indifference.

Melinda reached out suddenly and seized my wrist. Her grip was steel and it hurt but I made no move to break loose. It was a contact, a touching. "I'll show you what I mean," she said.

In the other room, the record had moved on to another cut. *Boy, you're gonna carry that weight, carry that weight a long time. . . .*

* * *

We didn't scoot far — downstream a year and a few blocks east — but we popped into cold, as only Milwaukee winters can be cold. Teeth-numbing, goose-bumping, ass-freezing cold. There was ice sheathing the trees — a wet, freezing wind during the night — and they looked as if they were made of crystal. Sidewalks were shoveled out like slit trenches, with white crystal walls shoulder-high. My breath made a huge cloud of steam in the air.

"Shit, it's cold!" I said. "Let me scoot over and grab a coat."

"You have your love to keep you warm, don't you?" Melinda let go of my wrist. I could scoot off without her now, if I wanted; but I'd been looking for her all this time and I might as well see it through.

"Don't bust my chops. Where are we? Why did you bring me here?"

"Where are we?" She smiled crookedly, and without humor. "Turn around."

I did. Behind us was a four-story apartment house. The sign in the first-floor window read ROOM FOR RENT in nice curlicue calligraphy. One of the windows on the second floor was broken. There was a rag stuffed in the hole and cardboard taped up behind it. The clapboard siding was old and loose and the wind off the lake shook the tiles and lifted them. Even while I watched, a hand parted the drapes and removed the For Rent sign. "What is this place?"

"You don't recognize it?"

"No, I —" I stopped in mid-sentence.

"Close your mouth or your tongue will freeze."

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"This isn't Shangri-La. . . ."

"It isn't?"

"It can't be."

"It can't?"

"No. Shangri-La was the apartment we rented together. The place where we lived for. . . ." For one year, I remembered. For one, single deliriously happy, nail-biting, throat-snapping year. Our life together had begun here and ended here, flamed out faster than a bourgeois marriage; and because we didn't have any of those scraps of paper the Establishment insisted on, the flames left no ash behind. No possessiveness. No obligations. No hard feelings. "No, Shangri-La was maybe not the best rental unit in the city, but it wasn't a *dump*."

"Do you want to scoot inside?"

"Y— No, whoever lives there will want privacy."

"We live there, Jack. We just now rented the place. How can we violate our own privacy? Come on," she grabbed my wrist. "We'll stay out-of-phase. Just a pair of time-voyeurs, you and me."

Blink and scoot and there we were, inside the third-floor apartment. The wood floor was bare of carpeting and littered with dirt and debris. The window at the far end was so filthy that, at best, you could call it translucent. A hole in the plaster exposed the ribbing in one wall. We had hung a macramé over it, I remembered, and pretended the hole wasn't there.

"This is it," I said. Slowly. Unwilling to believe it. "This is Shangri-la."

"I told you that."

"But . . . It wasn't like this, not really."

"No?"

It hadn't been this shabby and colorless. I remember what it was like, what it was *really* like — at least, at first. I'd been wrong: This could not be the bottom layer of the palimpsest. This was some horrid parody that Melinda had built. A new version she had written overtop of the fine, old original.

The door opened and Melly and I entered the apartment holding hands. She was wearing a buckskin fringed jacket over a denim skirt and knee-high socks. Her long, long ruby hair was held in place Indian-style with a bead-and-feather headband. Behind us, an enormous fat woman with a bored expression waited with a cigarette drooping from her lips and a pair

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of keys dangling from her fingers. "Seventy-five a month," she said. "There's an icebox an' the stove works. An' there's an old couch the last tenant left behind. The rest is up to you."

"We'll take it," I heard myself say.

"Rent's due the first." The landlady dropped the keys into my hands and walked away. Melly closed the door behind her and walked to the center of the room.

"There, you see?" said Melinda.

"See what?"

"'*We'll* take it.' He never even asked her for her input."

"Input? This is '71. Nobody asked for 'input.' Besides, I knew you loved the place, too. I could read it in your eyes."

"*Her* eyes, not mine. That isn't me. Not anymore."

"Then don't impose your values on her." But Melinda was right. The gulf between her and Melly-that-was was so vast that it was hard to believe they could be the same person. Sweet, soft, gentle and committed to sour, hard, callous and cynical. How could the one life have grown out of the other? There had to be a discontinuity; what my friends in math-science had called a singularity. As if someone had taken the film and made a negative print of her soul.

We watched us explore the apartment. It didn't take long: one large room, a kitchen alcove, a bath. We wound up by the battered, dull green sofa. I pushed and a dust cloud puffed out from the cushion. "Dusty," I heard myself say, "but I guess it will do." I sat down and Melly sat down on my lap. We sank deep into the cushion. Whatever springs it may have had were long shot.'

"Look at that," said Melinda. "She'll get filthy and she'll be very uncomfortable."

"I don't remember that it was uncomfortable."

"Of course not. You were on top."

I watched us kiss. Long and slow with lots of tongue. My right hand wandered up inside her denim skirt. Melly's commitment to underwear had been notional at best. "I don't remember any complaints."

"You thought she was a French horn. Something you could play."

That wasn't the way at all. I remember how awkward it always was, how I always felt as if I were all hands and feet, incredibly clumsy. How pleased I was when she gave me some evidence of her own pleasure.

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Women were civilized, more evolved than us, so we were always afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing. It was how they kept us tamed. They used our pleasure centers to condition us to loyalty. Pavlov's bell was nothing next to Melly's love.

Melly on-the-sofa groaned and squirmed; then she turned and straddled me on-the-sofa. I reached up and began unfastening her buckskin jacket. I now remembered how the fringes along the arms and across the back had tickled. Melinda now grabbed hold of my wrist. "Let's go. I don't want you standing here salivating over them."

Or she didn't want to be reminded that, once upon a time, she had loved me, too.

* * *

We flickered through that year and a day, always out-of-phase. Melinda slowed us down for all the bad times; rushed us through the good times. Once, she caught Melly washing the dishes while I watched a basketball game on TV. A big game, a tournament game; and I had been a roundball freak. But while *I* remembered her generous offer to do the dishes herself so I could watch, *she* remembered my selfishness.

Yet, Melinda was not being fair. We usually *had* done the household chores together — laughing and squirting sudsy water at each other or just enjoying the closeness. And the funny thing was I could remember those instances very clearly, but I could not remember who had won that game.

So there were good times that did not involve sex. Small things. Trivial things, really. A book shared. A movie that made her cry. A walk by the Lake. She taught me how to play go. I fixed the chain on her bicycle. Odd, how you could get further inside someone when you weren't trying to get inside someone.

"Do you remember that time we played miniature golf," I said, "and you said what the hell and shouted 'Fore!", and we began whacking those balls all over the place? Do you remember how we laughed?"

"I remember that we were arrested for disturbing the peace. And it was your idea, not mine."

"You went along with it."

"Because I was sick."

"Sick?"

"Sick. I had the Jack disease, and I suffered terribly from it. 'But I'm much better now.'"

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"Remember how you used to bring stray animals to the apartment?"

"Remember how you made me turn them loose again?"

"The lease. We'd've been tossed out if Old Lady Nimmerlass had found that sheepdog."

"You just don't understand."

Understanding meant total and unquestioning agreement with anything she said or did. I remembered that, too.

* * *

WE SCOOTED and, around us, our ghosts capered like an old-time silent movie played at high speed. The apartment grew steadily more disorderly. Clothing piles grew on the floor like stalagmites. Dishes accumulated in the sink. Daylight flickered through the window like the lamp on a motion picture projector. It reminded me of those scenes from *The Time Machine*.

Then, abruptly, the apartment was empty and Melinda stopped.

The floor was littered; the window dim with grime once more. I walked slowly around the room. The sofa remained, but the macramé was gone. The mattress, the posters, the stereo. The little plaster Buddha. Nothing remained to tell the world that Melly and I had ever lived there.

"Jesus, this is dismal," I said.

Melinda curled a lip. "You think *this* is dismal?" And she grabbed my wrist again and we scooted back one week . . .

. . . to Melly, crying quietly on the sofa, alone. It was daytime, late morning, and bright, natural light spotlighted her through the window.

I took a step forward and reached out before I recalled that we were still out-of-phase. I went for my belt controls but Melinda kept a steel grip on my wrist. "She needs me," I protested.

"I know," said Melinda. "I told you she was sick."

I looked at her with sudden suspicion. "Why is she crying?" Somehow, I knew it was not the soap opera on the boob tube.

"Why do you think? Because you were gone all night again."

"I pulled an all-nighter at the library for my poly-sci exam."

Melinda shook her head. "No, you didn't."

"Neal and I blew some weed and I crashed over at Pepperland."

Melinda shook her head. "No, you didn't."

"Melly, I —"

"Time scooting is wonderful, Jack. It's the greatest thing that ever

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happened. It means you can't lie anymore. No one can lie anymore."

"That's only if you know what you're seeing when you scoot. We've scanned a dozen scenes together just now and you always saw something different than I did."

"You need new glasses, Jack. Take off the rose-colored ones. We weren't that great together."

"We weren't that bad, either. Not until the end, anyway."

"You're romanticizing."

"Is that bad?"

"It blurs the details, Jack. It turns everything into a warm, fuzzy haze. You see the roses, but not the thorns."

"And hate lets you see clearly? If you only look at the thorns, does it matter how well focused they are?"

"I don't hate you, Jack. It's more like contempt."

"I'd rather you did hate me."

"I can arrange that."

"By more selective editing?"

"By more remembering. Do you want to scoot now or do you want to wait until you come through that door?"

"I'll . . . wait."

"Suit yourself." Melinda let go of my wrist again. Melly wept on the sofa, her hands limp in her lap, her head turned halfway up, her eyes as red as her hair. My hands hovered over my scooter controls. She needed someone to hold her; someone to love her.

And yet, what would I think to walk through the door and find my girl in the arms of another me?

O.K. Step One: avoid the ménage à trois. Head Jack off so he will not come back to the apartment. The hell with me. I deserved it. Step Two: comfort Melly. Grovel. Apologize. Do anything to make things the way they used to be.

"Just remember," said Melinda, "that you are twice her age now."

My finger froze over the button. I twisted my head to look at her. "What?"

She took me and led me into the bathroom, where we stood side by side before the mirror. "Look at yourself."

"What?" It was still the same old me. The same mug I'd been staring at for years and years.

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And years.

Some flecks of gray at the temple. A little sagging under the eyes and chin. A belt buckle that was hard to spot. The thirtysomething stoic-faced Melinda stood beside me. She and I had been the same age once, but now I had almost ten years on her. I shook my head slowly.

"Looks aren't everything."

"They were then. They were to them. And they didn't trust anyone over thirty. Can you imagine how you would look to her?"

"To you," I insisted. But I kept my hands from the control.

"Even I can't live inside *her* head again."

I turned away from the mirror and returned to the living room and stood by the crying girl. "I wanted to make things right between us," I told young Melly. "I wanted to start over and correct the mistake." She didn't react; she couldn't see or hear me.

"A little late for regrets, isn't it?" asked Melinda over my shoulder. "Today wasn't the mistake. You were the mistake, and I've already erased you."

"You can't erase. Space-time isn't built that way. You can only forget."

" A difference that makes no difference. I've taken care of my life. I've changed what needed changing. You are only a short, unpleasant episode in a long and happily productive life. Less than 6 percent of my memories."

"That's a bloodless, mathematical way of looking at two years. Not all years are weighted the same. You're more than 6 percent of my life."

"Your problem, not mine. You have your own memories."

"And so we'll each go through life remembering a different past. . . ."

"Isn't that the way it always was? Even before scooters."

My answer was cut short when the door opened and Jack walked in. I watched me walk past Melly with averted eyes and lay my books on the kitchen counter. I *had* been studying in the library. I *had* been blowing weed with Neal. I *had* been . . .

"What is her name?" asked Melly.

Jack opened a cabinet door and searched for a clean glass. "Whose?"

Melinda thinned her lips. "Whose? You knew damn well 'whose'!" Echoing Melly.

"After all these years," I said, "how can it still hurt?"

"After all these years," she said, "how can it not?"

And what could I answer? After all, I had scooted back here to fix the

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hurt. "We weren't married," I said.

Melly twisted on the sofa and turned red-rimmed eyes on Jack. "You don't need to write commitments on a piece of paper. Whose words were they, Jack?"

Jack wouldn't look at her. "No ties, you said. No possessiveness."

"But it happened. I did possess you; and you possessed me. You grew on me, Jack."

"Like a fungus," agreed Melinda.

"I'm moving out," Jack said.

Melinda sneered. "Just like that. Your decision, again. No consultation. It was never *us*, you bastard, just two me's sharing some space."

"Melly," said Jack without turning around, "I still love you. We can still be friends."

"In your dreams," Melinda told him.

I turned to her. "Yes, exactly."

Melly sprung from the sofa and ran to Jack, hugging him from behind. "I don't want you to go!" I saw me put my glass down on the countertop.

"I've met . . . someone else, Melly. We . . . . You've got to understand. I'm not like some guys. I can't keep two girls dangling."

Melinda couldn't resist editorializing. "Oh, that was so noble of you."

"I thought so, then." But things always look different later. It didn't look so noble, now.

"Her name was Cindy, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "Cindy," I agreed. I remember how confused I was. I loved them both, or thought I did. And they both loved me, or I thought they did. And I didn't want to hurt either one.

Jack turned around and Melly dropped to her knees, still hugging me. "But I love you, Jack."

"And how long did Cindy last?" asked Melinda, as if she didn't know. As if she hadn't been scooting around in the background all the time.

"Four months."

"Then she walked out on you."

"It was her apartment. She threw me out."

"Good for her. She was smarter than me."

"The circumstances were different."

"No, you just follow after the female who's activated your pleasure center most recently. You are so Pavlovian."

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"I never scooted back to try to fix things up with Cindy."

"No?"

"Nor with Jenny. Not even with Patty, and that one *did* have a piece of paper attached."

Melinda placed a hand over her heart. "What, am I supposed to feel flattered? Look at that." She reached out and turned me. "Look at her. Look at what she's doing. God, it's so degrading."

Melly was kissing me now. Long, slow, desperate kisses. It was half-memory and half-voyeurism, but I could feel her lips around me. "Yeah," I said finally. "Yeah, it is degrading."

"And you just stood there and let me!"

"It . . . felt good."

"And that's all that matters, right?"

"No, but —"

Melly turned her head and looked at us. "Your frequency is drifting into phase," she said. "If you're here to watch, I'd rather I couldn't see you watching." She rose to her feet and brushed her knees off. Jack turned my back on us for a few moments and zipped up. "Thanks a lot," I told me. "You couldn't wait until she was done?"

O.K., so frequency control on the belt-model scooters wasn't the best. We had hung around the scene too long and had snapped back onto the palimpsest. It made me wonder if better models weren't available somewhen. How many of me were here watching? How many Melindae?

Melinda spoke to Melly. "And after all that, after you debased yourself, he packed his shit together and walked out and never came back."

"I know that," Melly whispered.

"Then, why —"

"Because it was still worth the try."

"No, it wasn't. Believe me, I know."

"Why, because you're older than me?"

"Because I know how things turned out."

"No, you don't. Not really. It could always turn out different. Times have changed before. Older isn't always smarter."

"It gives you perspective."

"It only gives you hindsight. What's wrong with hoping?"

"False hopes —"

"Are still hopes."

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Melinda pointed. "Look at him. He's packed already."

Melly turned. "Jack!"

I was halfway to the door when I stopped me. "Don't you want to stick around?" I asked. "This conversation concerns you, too."

I shrugged my hand off. "You can talk about me all you want." He looked at Melly. "Cindy at least can finish what she starts, even with someone watching. She knows how to do things you can't even imagine."

"She ought to," I told me. "She's a professional."

I gave me a hard look back. "Christ, you sound just like my old man. You look like him, too. Cindy's going to quit that racket. She told me."

"Even prostitutes can have illusions. They just get over them faster. You know Dad is going to cut off our allowance over this."

"Then it's just as well Cindy won't really quit, isn't it?"

"So, you're perfectly happy to be her pimp?" Funny. I didn't remember it that way at all. What I remember was. . . .

"Don't make bourgeois judgments. What's wrong with the woman working and supporting the man for a change?"

Yeah, that's what I remembered. I took hold of my arm again. "What's wrong with both of you working and supporting each other?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. "Why don't you get a job?' Christ, you're so bourgeois. I'll never grow up to be you."

I pointed to Melly. "Damn it, look at her. If you walk out that door, you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life. It'll haunt you for years and years."

"No, you'll haunt me for years and years." I yanked myself out of my grip. "Get a life, will you; and stop trying to relive mine. You're too old to go farting after chicks."

"Don't go, damn it. You can still make things turn out better than they did."

Melinda spoke. "No, Jack. He's right. If he stayed it would be worse than if he left."

I looked at her. "How can you know that?"

"How do you think? I told me all about it once." She put her arm around Melly. "Think, Jack. What do you think *she* would do if she got ahold of a scooter tomorrow?"

Jack shook his head. "You old farts think you know everything," he said. "Well, times are different now. It's our turn and we're going to change the

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world. No more war, no more racism. Free speech. 'Something is happening and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?'"

"I know what it is. I was there, remember? You haven't done enough time scooting. If you did, you'd know that *plus ça change*. . . " The world found out in the '90s that Freedom of Speech meant the same thing to the New Left that Freedom of Religion meant to the Puritans. Heresy is Truth taken one step too far; and I had rapped with some of the veterans of 2017.

"Go fuck yourself," I told me and I started laughing because, hell, it was possible to do that nowadays.

"Please, Jack." Melly strained against Melinda's embrace. "Please, don't go!"

"And fuck you, too. You don't own me."

"Jack," I said; and I said, "What?," and I was never much of a placekicker but if I had been a football I'd've scored a field goal in Green Bay a couple miles up the Lake.

Instead, Jack crumpled into a shape very much like a football, holding himself and mewling. It was the first time I'd ever felt good after being kicked in the balls. Melly broke free of Melinda and ran to Jack's writhing form. She knelt by his side. "Oh, Jack, Jack. Does it hurt?" Only a woman could ask a question like that.

Melinda took my wrist again. "Come on," she said. "Let's blow this scene."

* * *

We scooted to the Avalanche in '72. The 'Lanche was crowded — it always had been, even before scooting — but Melinda had picked an off-hour and we managed to find an empty booth with only a minimum of fine-scooting and editing. I looked around the scene and realized for the first time how many aging collegians were hanging out. I guess when the pressures of meeting deadlines or sales quotas and all the rest get to be too much, it's always easier to scoot back to a happier time. I wondered if it might not be better to remember them as happier times than to scoot back and find out what they really had been like.

But everyone seemed to be having a good time. I saw Batu Khan at the bar drinking bourbon and milk and putting the moves on Mae West. Mae was always telling people to scoot up and see her some times. Batu was cracking jokes and laughing; not at all the vicious killer I remembered from Paris23. Timothy Learies was there, too, enjoying himself. But I looked

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away, finding the sight faintly distasteful. Not that I'm homophobic, but it just seemed a little too narcissistic, you know what I mean?

"Well, Jack," said Melinda after the waitress had delivered our beers, "looks like we've managed to mess up our lives all over again."

I shrugged. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Scooters are great little gadgets, really.

"That was a nice kick. Nicely timed and nicely placed."

"He deserved it."

"Who deserved it?"

"I deserved it. Shit." I lifted the glass mug and downed about half its contents. "That wasn't the way I remembered me. I remember feeling confused; feeling trapped."

"I suppose you did. Things always look different from the inside. I don't remember how I felt. I only remember how I will want me to have felt."

"You're a revisionist, that's all. We all are."

"You don't know how many times since then that I've wanted to place that kick myself."

"And yet, after what I did to you and you still ran to me when I was down."

She scowled and looked into her own beer. "I hate to see dumb animals suffer. She — I — hadn't had time for things to sink in. I was still running on fumes from the old relationship. It's easy to forget that we were different people then." She sighed. "I guess I've changed, too."

"I remember standing by the door, the first time around, with my hand on the knob. I wanted to go and I didn't want to go. I made a choice and chose wrong."

"You *have* changed." She sounded surprised.

I decided to make the try. "Enough that you and I . . . ?"

She laughed, but not a mean laugh. "But not changed entirely. No, Jack, not a chance. We've come too far from then, and along different paths."

"But maybe we can still be friends."

She shook her head. "That's what you said the first time around. Still, it has a different sound now. Like maybe you want real friendship, and not a default girl in case things don't work out with the new one."

"Is that what it sounded like to you? I really meant it though."

"Or you think you meant it. Oh, hell. The answer is 'maybe.' But not yet. For a long time I defined myself as Jack's girl. For a longer time after that,

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I defined myself as not-Jack's-girl. Now, maybe I can define myself as me, without any regard to you at all. I'm almost through the bitterness. It's taken me a long time, and it was like swimming through Jell-O, but I'm almost out the other side. If you can work through your obsession with might-have-beens, you might be decent company. Look me up some other time."

She scooted out then. The air made a little clap as it occupied the space she had vacated. Batu looked up from his barstool.

"St'uck out, again, Zhack? You neveh lea'n."

"In your face, Batu."

He beamed at me and gave Mae West a squeeze. "P'enty gi'rs, Zhack. Why you alla-time go chase afteh one? Too many say yes to wully oveh one who say no."

"If the one is worth it." I hoisted the glass and polished off the rest of the brew. But it would be Melinda, I realized, not the romanticized memory of Melly. And that was odd, because I had no idea what the new Melinda was like. Or would be like, the next time I found her. Maybe that was the

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important thing: the finding out.

"Well, it's not my style," said Batu, dropping his accent, "but good luck. Here." He handed me his card. "Drop in and catch my show, the next time you're in New York89."

"Sure thing, Batu." I looked down and saw that he had handed me two tickets, center row front. I looked back at him.

"And bl'ing a fl'iend."

I don't think he meant Bill Hickok.

I left the 'Lanche feeling more optimistic than I had felt in a long, long time. Sure, like I told me, I was too old to go chasing chicks, and what Melly and I had had was long gone down the memory hole. And sure, I was still on Melinda's shit list, but I wasn't at the top anymore. That was progress, anyway. It was something I could work on, if I could only catch Melinda at the right times. I strolled down Wells Street, whistling "Here Comes the Sun." There were always possibilities. You could always try again.

After all, yesterday is another day.

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Another F&SF favorite, **Marc Laidlaw**, brings us a rock-n-roll horror story. "Terror's Biggest Fan" takes place in an inland Oregon town (which bears a strange resemblance to my hometown and Marc's alma mater Eugene), where metal star Holly Terror has returned to relax and visit family. Her band has broken up, and she has to decide what to do with her future. But she is being stalked by a young man who sees worlds in her music, dark magic worlds that he believes she has put there just for him.

John Morressy rounds out the issue with a little humor. In "Working Stiffs," Harry has a problem with his business: he can't find good workers. His nephew Jerome solves the problem by hiring a group of zombies. But zombies, while excellent workers, create problems of their own. . .

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